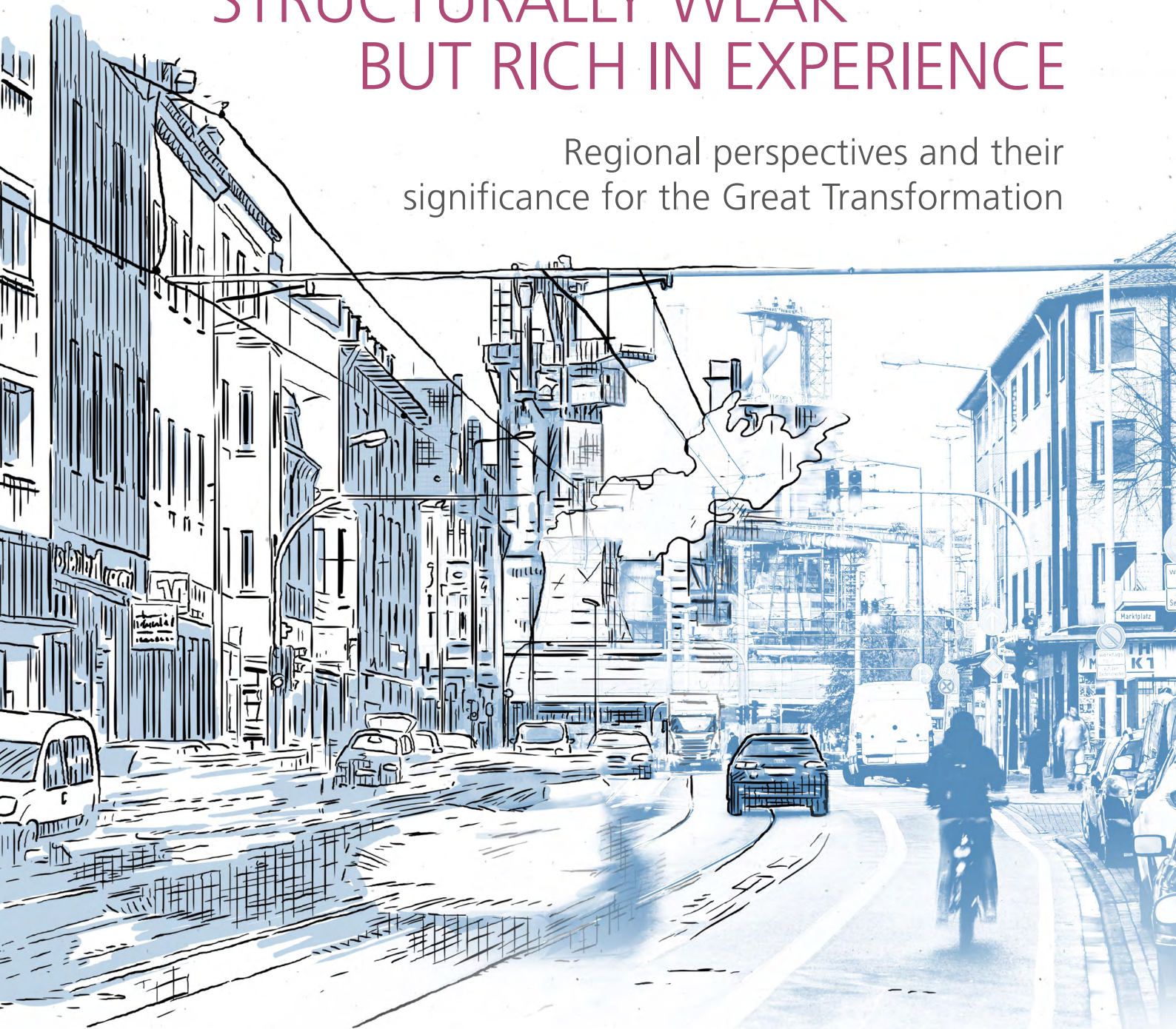


Paulina Fröhlich, Tom Mannewitz & Florian Ranft

# DISREGARDED

STRUCTURALLY WEAK  
BUT RICH IN EXPERIENCE

Regional perspectives and their  
significance for the Great Transformation



### **Das Progressive Zentrum**

Das Progressive Zentrum is an independent, non-profit think tank founded in 2007, devoted to establishing new networks of progressive actors from different backgrounds and promoting active and effective policies for economic and social progress. It involves especially next generation German and European innovative thinkers and decision-makers in the debates. Its thematic priorities are situated within the three programmes Future of Democracy, Economic and Social Transformation and International Dialogue, with a particular focus on European integration and the transatlantic partnership. The organisation is based in Berlin and also operates in many European countries as well as in the United States.

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The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is the oldest political foundation in Germany with a rich tradition dating back to its foundation in 1925. Today, it remains loyal to the legacy of its namesake and campaigns for the core ideas and values of social democracy: freedom, justice and solidarity. It has close ties to social democracy and the free trade unions.

FES promotes the advancement of social democracy, in particular with:

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- think tanks;
- international cooperation with our international network of offices in more than 100 countries;
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- maintaining the collective memory of social democracy with archives, libraries and more.

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The Division for Analysis, Planning and Consulting at the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung sees itself as a sort of radar system mapping out the future and as an 'ideas factory' for social democracy. It combines analysis and discussion in its work. It brings together expertise from the fields of academia, civil society, economics, administration and politics. Its aim and purpose is to advise political and trade union decision-makers to help them meet current and future challenges, and to introduce progressive ideas into the social policy debate.

# Disregarded: Structurally weak but rich in experience

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When tackling the climate crisis many people in structurally weak regions feel disregarded. This is the conclusion reached by a unique study of the social and ecological transformation – referred to as the Great Transformation in this study – in Germany. Qualitative doorstep conversations showed that, from the respondents' standpoint, social inequalities and regional exclusion are more pressing issues than man-made global warming. Building on the respondents' own accounts and perspectives on personal, regional and national challenges for the future, this study brings to light three patterns of interpretation and develops three specific recommendations for action. It follows on from the survey conducted in 2017 *Return to the Politically Abandoned*, which dealt with right-wing populist strongholds in structurally weak regions.

### THE MAIN FINDINGS

The world and therefore also Germany faces fundamental change, a Great Transformation. This study's main concern is to highlight ways in which those affected by this Great Transformation can be engaged to help shape it. After all, it is precisely the inhabitants of structurally weak regions who will bear the brunt of the shifts resulting from attempts to address the socio-ecological crisis. From the respondents' perspective, although the climate plays a very important, albeit not dominant, role among the tasks facing Germany, of much greater cause for concern are social disparities, such as social division, social injustices and the lack of social cohesion. Social afflictions stand out in an even harsher light in the regional context. Here the lack of decent local infrastructure and leisure-time and cultural facilities gives rise to creeping hopelessness and fears of an inexorable downward spiral. Climate and environmental issues scarcely figure at local level. On the positive side, the majority of respondents regard democracy and its institutions as up to the job of coping with the transformation.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION: MONEY, ABILITY TO SET THE AGENDA AND VOICE

The looming upheaval in structurally weak areas is not a fait accompli, however. It also offers opportunities. By giving people money, a chance to set the agenda and a voice, they can be brought on board to tackle the process of change, and at the same time equal living conditions can be fostered in structurally weak regions. Money has to be invested to ensure the future of the local economy and to promote climate-friendly measures in citizens' everyday lives. To be able to contribute, people in disrupted regions need targeted investments and easily accessible opportunities, so that these regions become known not for the transformation's negative aspects, but for what it opens up. One instrument that could be deployed to tackle such regional transformation processes is the 'transformation cluster'. If people have more voice and feel that their achievements are more respected, it can only boost democratic negotiation processes.

### ABOUT THIS STUDY

The Progressive Zentrum, in cooperation with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, conducted over 200 doorstep conversations in four structurally weak regions of Germany. The aim was to understand people's personal priorities in structurally weak regions, their views and the patterns of interpretation of change they gave rise to. The study was underpinned by an intensive research strategy. To that end, we questioned a group of people who are often talked about in the public debate, but whose voices are seldom heard. The conversations took place in Bitterfeld-Wolfen, Duisburg and Bochum, as well as in Saarbrücken region and Western Pomerania-Greifswald.

**We would like to thank all those who talked to us within the framework of this study.**

## 1

## INTRODUCTION: CHALLENGES OF THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION

One of the most urgent political tasks facing us today is to develop policy approaches to the climate crisis. And this comes at a time when social inequalities are increasing, which has been cast in an even harsher light by the pandemic. The magnitude of this enormous collective challenge is made clear by an assessment carried out by KfW Research: by 2045 Germany will have to invest € 5 trillion in order to achieve climate neutrality in the problem areas of transport, energy, private households and industry.<sup>1</sup> Our only chance of bringing this about is if we force ourselves to make fundamental changes in production and the workplace, in our mobility, in consumption and housing – and very urgently. Then the Great Transformation that the German Advisory Council on Global Change talked about in 2011 would finally get under way.<sup>2</sup> The global community can no longer dodge the issue if it hopes to avoid catastrophic upheavals across the world. According to their coalition agreement,<sup>3</sup> the coalition parties – Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Greens and the Free Democratic Party (FDP) – are aware of the size of the task and its accompanying circumstances. The coalition partners will necessarily be measured by their self-established goal of ‘setting a course for a decade of social, environmental, economic, digital and societal renewal’.<sup>4</sup>

For the individual, however, far-reaching societal change triggers uncertainty. Some people are cheerleaders for disruption and innovation, but others lament the relentless process of renewal and acceleration. Generally speaking, in the case of most structural transformation processes, substantial segments of social groups have felt disregarded. If we consider politics and representative democracy as a system with the legitimate right to set out a framework for action, its actors should pay due attention to differing interests and needs. People’s needs and desires should be guiding factors for political decision-makers. If different interpretations of change and the needs of different groups for protection are not afforded sufficient space, and adequate opportunities for participation are not ensured, all too often the political and societal consequences will be severe.

This was clearly illustrated in the political realm in the context of Germany’s federal election in 2017 and the rise of Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). The election took place against the backdrop of the so-called refugee and migration crisis, and the question of whether Germany as a society could cope. The study published in 2018 by the Progressive Zentrum *Rückkehr zu den politisch Verlassenen* (Return to the Politically Abandoned) concluded from doorstep conversations in structurally weak regions that many people felt that politicians had abandoned them.<sup>5</sup> It identified a comparative sense of devaluation among interviewees as the explanation for the success of right-wing populists in structurally weak regions. Although the issue of immigration was seen as the country’s main challenge, those interviewed cited social grievances, such as insecure employment or the depletion of social infrastructure, as the ‘biggest problems’ in their everyday lives.<sup>6</sup>

Besides realising concrete economic and industrial objectives, it will be crucial to grasp the social, environmental and economic dimensions of the climate crisis as being

1 Cf. Christine Volk, KfW Research: Klimaneutralität bis Mitte des Jahrhunderts erfordert Investitionen von 5 Billionen EUR [Climate Neutrality by Mid-century Requires Investment of 5 Trillion Euros], 7 October 2021, available at: [https://www.kfw.de/%C3%9Cber-die-KfW/Newsroom/Aktuelles/Pressemitteilungen-Details\\_673344.html](https://www.kfw.de/%C3%9Cber-die-KfW/Newsroom/Aktuelles/Pressemitteilungen-Details_673344.html)

2 Cf. WBGU, Welt im Wandel. Gesellschaftsvertrag für eine Große Transformation [A Changing World. A Social Contract for a Great Transformation], Berlin 2011, available at: [https://www.wbgu.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/wbgu/publikationen/hauptgutachten/hg2011/pdf/wbgu\\_jg2011.pdf](https://www.wbgu.de/fileadmin/user_upload/wbgu/publikationen/hauptgutachten/hg2011/pdf/wbgu_jg2011.pdf)

3 Cf. SPD, BÜNDNIS 90 / DIE GRÜNEN and FDP, Mehr Fortschritt wagen. Bündnis für Freiheit, Gerechtigkeit und Nachhaltigkeit. Koalitionsvertrag 2021 – 2025 zwischen der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands (SPD), BÜNDNIS 90 / DIE GRÜNEN und den Freien Demokraten (FDP) [Dare more progress. Alliance for freedom, justice and sustainability. Coalition agreement 2021 – 2025 between SPD, BÜNDNIS 90 / THE GREENS and FDP], Berlin 2021, available at: [https://www.spd.de/fileadmin/Dokumente/Koalitionsvertrag/Koalitionsvertrag\\_2021-2025.pdf](https://www.spd.de/fileadmin/Dokumente/Koalitionsvertrag/Koalitionsvertrag_2021-2025.pdf)

4 Cf. SPD, BÜNDNIS 90 / DIE GRÜNEN und FDP, Ergebnis der Sondierungen zwischen SPD, BÜNDNIS 90 / DIE GRÜNEN und FDP [Results of Consultations between SPD, BÜNDNIS 90 / THE GREENS and FDP], Berlin 2021, available at [https://www.spd.de/fileadmin/Dokumente/Sonstiges/20211015\\_Ergebnis\\_Sondierungen.pdf](https://www.spd.de/fileadmin/Dokumente/Sonstiges/20211015_Ergebnis_Sondierungen.pdf)

5 See Johannes Hillje, Rückkehr zu den politisch Verlassenen: Gespräche in rechtspopulistischen Hochburgen in Deutschland und Frankreich [Return to the Politically Abandoned: Conversations in Right-wing Populist Strongholds in Germany], Das Progressive Zentrum, Berlin 2018, available at: <https://www.progressives-zentrum.org/politically-abandoned/?lang=en>

6 Ibid., p. 20.

fundamentally connected with each other. In order to create a new political and regulatory framework for the upcoming Great Transformation towards a climate-friendly and just future, new norms and designs for society must be introduced into public debate in order to give people a sense of security and support in a time of upheaval. This not only requires an immense coordination effort on the part of the whole society but also raises far-reaching social questions. Those most severely affected by the material and psychological effects of the changes will have to be helped to cope with them. It will be important to involve those social groups which are subjectively and objectively shut out of an active role in shaping the transformation: the coal miners for whom the phasing out of coal is happening much too fast, or climate activists who want transformation to be speeded up. If in the coming years politicians are able, by means of participation and bringing people on board, to ease the tensions between socio-ecological change and its social consequences the deep-seated collective pessimism regarding the future may also be alleviated.<sup>7</sup> That should be the goal of all democrats.

The aim of this study is to help to reconcile a climate-friendly economy with people and their needs. Given the urgency of the challenges the capabilities of political decision-makers are central. But before politicians can play

their democratic part they have to listen. Democracy bears the promise that decisions will be negotiated collectively and balanced over the long term. There are, however, spaces that are dominated by decisions made by others. Our aim in this study is not 'to take people with us', as the saying goes. Rather we want to give an outlet to those whose voices are too rarely heard on talk shows and mainstream media, the political stage and economic debates in Germany: people who express their views and fears, but also their hopes for the Great Transformation. These voices make it clear how people regard the coming challenges, by what measures they assess them and what kinds of things take priority. Politicians who neglect to pay attention to these voices risk not only failing to take parts of the population with them, but also leaving potential social spaces and intellectual impulses unused. Given the scope of the upcoming societal changes a pluralistic garland of ideas and perspectives is needed.

**The objective here is to identify ways to enable those affected by the Great Transformation to help shape the future.** Building on an evaluation of over 200 doorstep conversations, the study provides answers to the question of how political actors can respond to the needs, experiences and interests of citizens in structurally weak regions, not only to cope with the Great Transformation, but to tackle it together.

<sup>7</sup> See Adam Przeworski, *Crises of Democracy*, Cambridge 2019; Deloitte, *Global Millennial Survey: A 'Generation Disrupted'*, 2019, available at: <https://www2.deloitte.com/de/de/pages/innovation/contents/millennial-survey-2019.html>



## 2

## THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION: WHY LISTEN TO STRUCTURALLY WEAK REGIONS?

There have been only two upheavals in the history of humanity that might justifiably be termed a 'Great Transformation', because they changed life profoundly, sustainably and radically. These were the Neolithic Revolution, which marks the transition from hunter-gatherer society to agricultural society, and the Industrial Revolution. The understanding that has grown over the past few decades that natural resources are limited and the earth's natural balance is vulnerable has set processes in motion that, in the aggregate, call for a third Great Transformation.<sup>8</sup>

The third Great Transformation is characterised by:<sup>9</sup>

- **duration:** it will require more than a few years or decades;
- **diversity:** the economy and technology, politics, society and culture undergo fundamental changes;
- **exceptionality:** there is no blueprint, no model for this new upheaval;
- **asynchronicity:** partial transformations proceed at their own pace and follow their own time schedules;
- **(co-)evolutionary character:** the Great Transformation is hard to control centrally, and its subsystems interact. Global turbulence is scarcely to be avoided.

Two things should be added. First, the Great Transformation is not set in stone. It is not simply befalling us. It is man-made and a future task for all who get involved – especially for those with progressive social views who have taken it on themselves to take on changes proactively, as they arise.

Second, the transformation will cause social fractures. They will primarily concern issues of distributive justice: who will pay the cost of it and in what way? The fact that the 'polluter pays' principle and the solidarity principle are regularly played off against one another shows how far we still have to go. Tensions are already appearing:

- between different milieus (for example, between the socio-ecological and the precarious milieu), which draw on various social, financial and cultural resources to cope with change and have different values;<sup>10</sup>
- between town and countryside (for example, on issues of infrastructure links and individual lifestyles);
- between different generations (for example, in relation to pension levels, resource consumption, public debt and so on);
- between short- and long-term interests (for example, in relation to investments in climate protection measures in contrast with state aid during acute economic crises).

These tensions are calling conventional political paradigms into question and practically no aspects of individual and societal life will be spared. In Germany, the debate is oriented primarily towards the energy transition, sustainability, demographic development, outmigration from rural areas, lack of housing in towns and cities, 'prosperity without growth',<sup>11</sup> immigration and mobility. All this manifested itself as if under a prism in the run up to the Bundestag election in 2021: never before had the topics mentioned garnered so much space on election programmes, talk shows, the news and front pages.

What has been lacking so far are suggestions for how the Great Transformation can be shaped in structurally weak regions and how social inequalities can be rebalanced there and new potential harnessed. Two arguments follow as to why this is important.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. WBGU, Welt im Wandel. Gesellschaftsvertrag für eine Große Transformation [A Changing World. A Social Contract for a Great Transformation], Berlin 2011, available at [https://www.wbgu.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/wbgu/publikationen/hauptgutachten/hg2011/pdf/wbgu\\_jg2011.pdf](https://www.wbgu.de/fileadmin/user_upload/wbgu/publikationen/hauptgutachten/hg2011/pdf/wbgu_jg2011.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. pp. 87–91.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. SINUS Markt- und Sozialforschung GmbH, Informationen zu den SINUS-Milieus 2021 [Information on the SINUS Milieus 2021], Heidelberg and Berlin 2021.

<sup>11</sup> See Tim Jackson, Wohlstand ohne Wachstum: Grundlagen für eine zukunftsfähige Wirtschaft [Prosperity Without Growth: Foundations for a Future-Viable Economy], Munich 2017; Meinhard Miegel, Exit: Wohlstand ohne Wachstum [Exit: Prosperity Without Growth], Berlin 2010; Niko Paech, Befreiung vom Überfluss: Auf dem Weg in die Postwachstumsökonomie [Liberation from Abundance: Towards a Post-Growth Economy], Munich 2012; Maja Göpel, Unsere Welt neu denken: Eine Einladung [Rethinking our World: an Invitation], Berlin 2020; Harald Welzer and Klaus Wiegandt (eds), Wege aus der Wachstumsgesellschaft [Paths out of the Growth Economy], Frankfurt a.M. 2013.



## FROM PASSIVE ACTORS TO ACTIVE SHAPERS: THE 'CAPABILITY ARGUMENT'

The 'capability argument' is not about the attitudes of those who have been characterised as the 'precariat', the 'socially deprived' or the 'underclass', but rather about people who live in structurally weak areas, regardless of whether they are affluent or in need, working people or unemployed. It is those living in the structurally weak regions who are likely to be affected by the Great Transformation, but they rarely figure in the political debate. The discourse tends to be dominated by those living in urban, cosmopolitan spaces which results in a limited reflection and understanding of the problems associated in these regions.

Democracy entails a commitment that decisions will be negotiated collectively and in accordance with fair rules.

**When creating frameworks for action or rules of behaviour those affected should be included, as expressed by the activist slogan 'nothing about us without us'.** This democratic promise of giving equal and fair access to shaping and making decisions about the future is not always realised, however. Credible physically real and representative decision-making spaces are needed for those who are or will be particularly affected by the transformation. This reflects a loss of social and political trust and can exacerbate societal conflicts between so-called 'TANS' and 'GALS',<sup>12</sup> communitarians and cosmopolitans,<sup>13</sup> or 'Somewheres' and 'Anywheres'.<sup>14</sup> Because if the Great Transformation is to succeed, social disparities need to be ameliorated. How could these disparities be identified without listening to the people affected? How can they be dealt with in a sustainable and socially acceptable way if the 'objects' of change do not to some extent become its 'agents'? This is the study's point of departure, also because the Great Transformation is not only a challenge and acid test for democracy, but it will have to prove itself in structurally weak areas: more than 13 million people (16% of the population) live in areas that the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), in *Ungleiches Deutschland* (Unequal Germany or the Disparities Report), characterises as 'urban regions undergoing long-term structural change' and 'rural areas in permanent structural crisis' – in structurally weak regions.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> GAL stands for Grün-Alternativ-Liberal (Green-Alternative-Liberal), TAN stands for Traditionalistisch-Autoritär-Nationalistisch (Traditionalist-Authoritarian-Nationalist); see Lisbeth Hooghe and Gary Marks, Cleavage Theory Meets Europe's Crises: Lipset, Rokkan, and the Transnational Cleavage, *Journal of European Public Policy* 25 (1), 2018, pp. 109–135.

<sup>13</sup> See Wolfgang Merkel, Kosmopolitismus versus Kommunitarismus: Ein neuer Konflikt in der Demokratie [Cosmopolitanism Versus Communitarianism: a New conflict in Democracy], in: Philipp Harfst, Ina Kubbe and Thomas Poguntke (eds), *Parties, Governments and Elites. The Comparative Study of Democracy*, Wiesbaden 2017, pp. 9–23.

<sup>14</sup> See David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics*, London 2017.

<sup>15</sup> See Philipp Fink, Martin Hennecke and Heinrich Tiemann, *Ungleiches Deutschland. Sozioökonomischer Disparitätenbericht 2019. Für ein besseres Leben [Unequal Germany. Report on Socioeconomic Disparities 2019. For a better life]*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bonn 2019, p. 8, available at: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/fes/15400-20190528.pdf>

## ECONOMICALLY UNDERDEVELOPED, BUT RICH IN EXPERIENCE: THE 'POTENTIAL ARGUMENT'

The 'potential argument' assumes that structurally weak regions will be particularly hard hit by the Great Transformation because they are less flexible and competitive than booming regions and – especially important – their current structural weaknesses are often the result of downward spirals that go back in time. In the past whole industries were closed down in regions that were completely dependent on them because they were uncompetitive or lacked innovation, or because of general structural change or systemic breakdown across the board, as in East Germany. This had far-reaching consequences: collapsing tax revenues, cultural change in the workplace and private life, unemployment, loss of prospects, migration and, as a result of all these factors, less investment. Eventually the affected regions lost their attractiveness for new economic sectors or potential incomers. It can easily be imagined that structurally weak areas will be poorly equipped to cope with coming challenges. The framework for future developments comprises a population with above average age, negative migration balance, and below average level of qualifications, combined with poor economic performance, weak public transport and lack of attractiveness to potential investors. The portion of the population that has little to hope for from the Great Transformation but a great deal to fear from it is concentrated primarily in structurally weak areas.

That is one side of the coin. On the other side, people living in structurally weak areas often have considerable experience of transformation that they can fall back on. Thus although affected regions are structurally weak, their inhabitants are rich in experience. Difficulties that could befall other regions in future, such as demographic change and problems of interconnected infrastructure, have long been a reality in structurally weak areas, along with ways of coping with them. Looking back, what worked and what did not? What practices and resources are needed on the ground? What solutions proved successful? Paying close attention here can pay off, not only for the further development of the regions in question but also for other regions in Germany and elsewhere in Europe. Moreover, such regions, despite their structural weakness, undoubtedly have potential. The disused areas left by the collapse of old structures are 'fallow fields'; housing and labour are cheaper than in thriving regions, and the authorities sometimes take a more lenient view of compliance with the mass of regulations. That can significantly boost a region's economic attraction, as the Tesla Gigafactory in Grünheide (Berlin-Brandenburg) shows. **In sum, a structurally weak area can in many respects be a pioneer region, highlighting both its own outlook on future challenges and experiences of transformation it can call on.** The debate on the Great Transformation must reflect all this much more closely than heretofore.

FIGURE 1

## Overview of structurally weak regions

- Urban regions experiencing continuous structural change
- Rural regions in permanent structural crisis
- 📍 Survey regions

### FEDERAL AVERAGES (ALL DISTRICTS IN GERMANY)

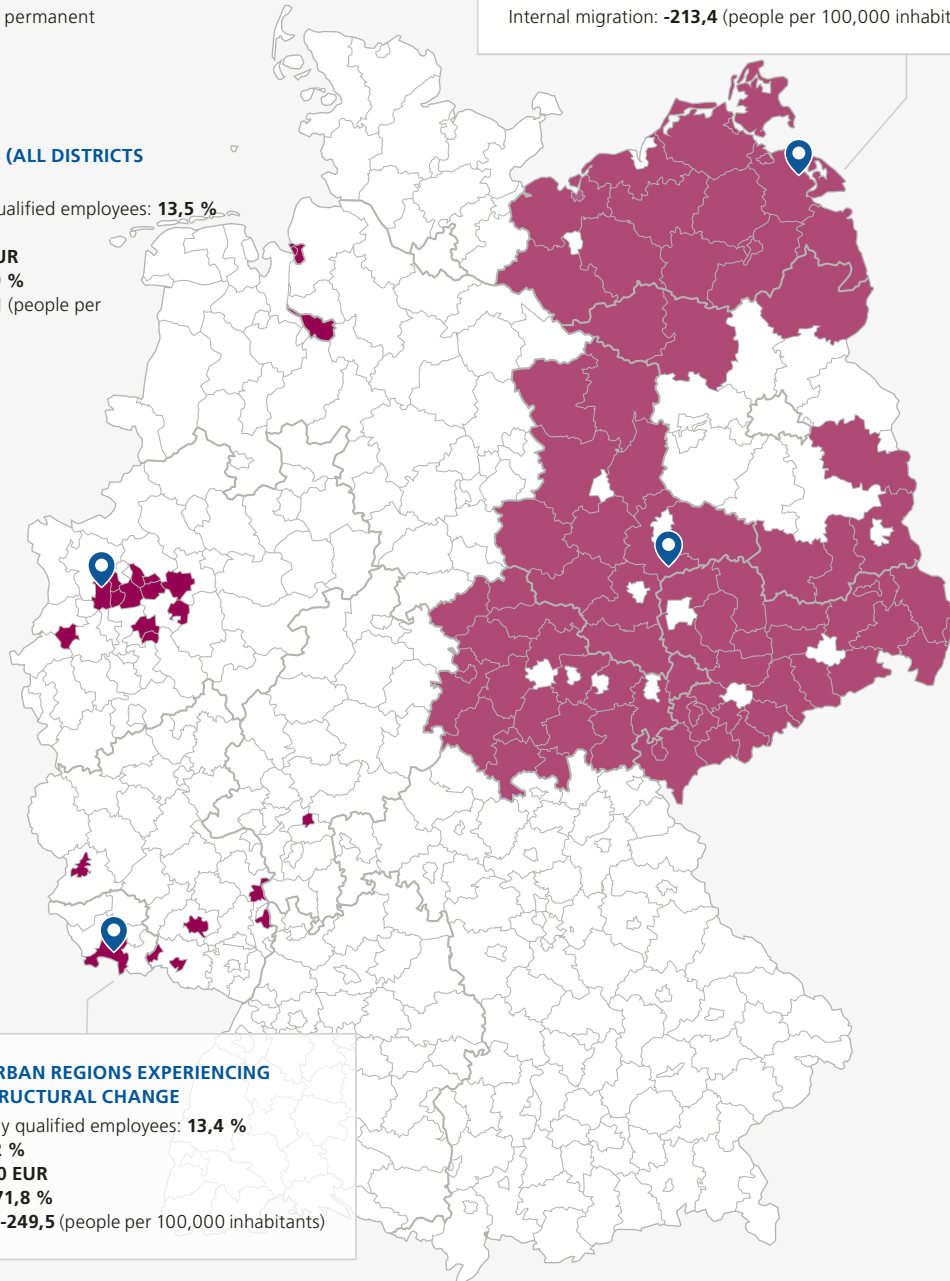
Proportion of highly qualified employees: **13,5 %**  
 Child poverty: **12,8 %**  
 Gross wages: **3.148 EUR**  
 Electoral turnout: **75,9 %**  
 Internal migration: **-1,1** (people per 100,000 inhabitants)

### AVERAGE FOR RURAL REGIONS IN PERMANENT STRUCTURAL CRISIS

Proportion of highly qualified employees: **10,5 %**  
 Child poverty: **15,5 %**  
 Gross wages: **2.464 EUR**  
 Electoral turnout: **72 %**  
 Internal migration: **-213,4** (people per 100,000 inhabitants)

### AVERAGE FOR URBAN REGIONS EXPERIENCING CONTINUOUS STRUCTURAL CHANGE

Proportion of highly qualified employees: **13,4 %**  
 Child poverty: **27,2 %**  
 Gross wages: **3.190 EUR**  
 Electoral turnout: **71,8 %**  
 Internal migration: **-249,5** (people per 100,000 inhabitants)



Note: Authors' presentation. Sources: Philipp Fink, Martin Hennecke and Heinrich Tiemann. Ungleiches Deutschland. Sozioökonomischer Disparitätenbericht 2019. Für ein besseres Leben (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung), Bonn 2019 (auf Basis der Daten von: Bundesagentur für Arbeit, Statistisches Bundesamt, Bundesinstitut für Bau, Stadt und Raumforschung, Bundesministerium für Verkehr und digitale Infrastruktur, Thünen Institut, Wegweiser Kommune der Bertelsmann Stiftung, FDZ der Statistischen Ämter des Bundes und der Länder, Bundesamt für Kartografie und Geodäsie, GeoBasisDE/BKG 2018).

## 3

## ABOUT THE STUDY

Opinion surveys on particular aspects of the Great Transformation are generally partially or fully standardised representative sample surveys, because they aim to provide a generalisable (representative) picture of societal views. The downside of such snapshots of opinion is that people tend to take too little account of the new, the unfamiliar and the unexpected.

This study takes a different approach: it aims to open up to people's self-selected priorities in structurally weak regions, to look at how people see things and the paradigms of change that arise from this. It is accompanied by an intensive research strategy. This requires, as Gary King, Robert Keohane and Sidney Verba called it, '*soaking and poking*'<sup>16</sup> – immersing oneself in the object of research. This is why we set out into the field with a small and motivated team to gather data.

This is accompanied by systematising our findings because a mere juxtaposition of individual case studies does not yield an overall picture. The individual comments of over 200 respondents were therefore clustered in content before data analysis, with similar attitudes being brought together and dissimilar ones separated out.

We proceeded in three stages: identifying structurally weak regions in Germany, selecting regions to study and selecting respondents.

### IDENTIFYING STRUCTURALLY WEAK REGIONS IN GERMANY

First we identified structurally weak regions in Germany. In this the study mainly followed the **Disparities Report** of the FES.<sup>17</sup> The report divides independent (*kreisfreie*) towns and cities and rural districts (*Landkreise*) into five spatial types:

- economy, employment and labour market (proportion of highly qualified workers);
- educational and life opportunities (old-age and child poverty);
- well-being and health (life expectancy, accessibility of GPs, gross pay);
- government action and participation (municipal debts, election turnout);
- internal migration (overall migration balance).

We also consulted the study *Innovationsbasierter regionaler Strukturwandel – Strukturschwache Regionen in Deutschland* (Innovation-based Structural Change – Structurally Weak Regions in Germany) by the Fraunhofer Institute for Systems and Innovation Research (ISI), which uses the following criteria for classifying spatial types: the unem-



<sup>16</sup> Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry. Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*, Princeton 1994, p. 38.

<sup>17</sup> See Philipp Fink, Martin Hennecke, Heinrich Tiemann, *Ungleiches Deutschland. Sozioökonomischer Disparitätenbericht 2019. Für ein besseres Leben*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bonn 2019, available at: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/fes/15400-20190528.pdf>. Published in English (translated by James Patterson) as *Unequal Germany. Socio-economic Disparities Report 2019*, available at: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/fes/15766.pdf>

Table 1

Overview of the regions covered in the survey<sup>18</sup>

INTERVIEW LOCATION	UNIT	FEDERAL STATE (LAND)	CHARACTER	REGION	INTERVIEWS
Bitterfeld-Wolfen	Medium-sized town	Saxony-Anhalt	Fairly rural	East	52
Duisburg and Bochum	City	North Rhine-Westphalia	Not rural	West	55
Regional Association Saarbrücken	Regional association	Saarland	Not rural	Southwest	56
Vorpommern-Greifswald	District	Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania	Rural	Northeast	54
<b>Total:</b>					<b>217</b>

ployment rate (2015), gross domestic product (GDP) per person employed (2015), private and public R&D expenditure per inhabitant (2013), the number of commuters relative to the number of inhabitants (2013) and industrial gross value added as a proportion of GDP (2015).<sup>19</sup>

In order to minimise distortions arising because of case selection, urban and rural,<sup>20</sup> and eastern and western German regions were considered as we aimed to study structurally weak regions, not eastern Germany or rural areas.

## SELECTED REGIONS

In the second step we selected four regions to cover in the survey. We included indicators of structural weaknesses (such as the unemployment rate, levels of old-age and child poverty, the proportion of social benefit recipients according to SGB II and highly qualified people in the workplace) in the selection of specific streets and interview locations. We factored in current political and industrial dynamics locally, as well as industrial policy history (such as factory closures, experiences with globalisation and transformation, industrial decline, dependence on fossil fuel-based industries) and tips from local experts with extensive regional knowledge (for example, local politicians). Table 1 provides a summary of the regions we studied.

The interview location **Bitterfeld-Wolfen**<sup>21</sup> encompasses the municipalities of Bitterfeld, Wolfen, Greppin, Holzweißig and Thalheim. This was formerly the so-called 'Chemical

Triangle of the GDR', one of the oldest chemical production sites in Europe, which during the GDR period was notorious for its high level of environmental pollution<sup>22</sup> and which after reunification suffered massive economic decline. Hopes of an economic uplift awakened by Germany's 'Solar Valley' in the early 2000s were quickly dashed, however. Many people and the region itself have lived through two deindustrialisation processes: one after reunification and the other in the 2000s when the Chinese solar industry outpaced its German rival.<sup>23</sup> Not least because of its bleak economic prospects the region is likely to experience a significant population loss in the future.

In **Duisburg** the focus was on the city districts of Marxloh, Hüttenheim, Bruckhausen and Meiderich-Beeck.<sup>24</sup> These are partly districts that are characterised by social problems (such as a high proportion of inhabitants in need of social welfare, unemployment and immigration), demographic developments (drain) and economic circumstances (industrial character, to some extent lagging investment). To make matters worse, there were such decisive events as the closure of the Thyssen-Krupp heavy plate mill in Duisburg-Hüttenheim,<sup>25</sup> which looks back on a long tradition as a workers' settlement. The inhabitants are disproportionately on lower incomes and have problems with integration, unemployment and low social capital. The city districts of **Bochum-Riemke** (formerly a bituminous coal field) and Bochum-Laer (where the Opel works closed in 2014) also proved to be important interview locations because of the changes they have undergone.

<sup>18</sup> Two interviews were conducted in the Zeitz region. They were included in the evaluation, but were not listed separately by region.

<sup>19</sup> See Knut Koschatzky and Henning Kroll, *Innovationsbasierter regionaler Strukturwandel – Strukturschwache Regionen in Deutschland* [Innovation-based Regional Structural Change – Economically Underdeveloped Regions in Germany], Fraunhofer ISI Arbeitspapiere Unternehmen und Region No. R1/2019, Karlsruhe 2019, available at: [https://www.isi.fraunhofer.de/content/dam/isi/dokumente/ccp/unternehmen-region/2019/ap\\_r1\\_2019.pdf](https://www.isi.fraunhofer.de/content/dam/isi/dokumente/ccp/unternehmen-region/2019/ap_r1_2019.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> On the differentiation of 'Kreisregionen' [counties including county towns and their surrounding districts] in terms of the 'rural' dimension, see: Thünen-Institut für Ländliche Räume (ed.), *Thünen-Landatlas Ausgabe*, 3 July 2021, Braunschweig 2021, available at: <https://karten.landatlas.de/app/landatlas/>, [https://literatur.thuenen.de/digbib\\_extern/dn057783.pdf](https://literatur.thuenen.de/digbib_extern/dn057783.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> The following socio-structural data were taken from: Bertelsmann Stiftung, *Wegweiser Kommune* [A Demographics Portal], available at: <https://www.wegweiser-kommune.de/>

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, the 30-minute documentary filmed illegally in the GDR in 1988 'Bitteres aus Bitterfeld. Eine Bestandsaufnahme' [Something Bitter from Bitterfeld. An Inventory], as well as Monika Maron, *Flugasche* [Fly Ash], Frankfurt am Main 1981.

<sup>23</sup> See Andrea Brock, Benjamin K. Sovacool, Andrew Hook, *Volatile Photovoltaics: Green Industrialization, Sacrifice Zones, and the Political Ecology of Solar Energy in Germany*, *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 2021, pp. 1–23.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Stadt Duisburg, *Sozialbericht 2012 Stadt Duisburg. Schwerpunktthema: Prekäre Lebenslagen von Kindern und Jugendlichen* [Social Report 2012 on the City of Duisburg. Special Topic: Precarious Life Circumstances of Children and Young People], Duisburg 2013.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Westdeutscher Rundfunk, *Duisburg: Thyssen-Krupp bereitet Schließung von Grobblechwerk vor* [Duisburg: Thyssen-Krupp Prepares for the Closure of its Heavy Plate Mill], 14 December 2020, available at: <https://www1.wdr.de/nachrichten/ruhrgebiet/grobblechwerk-thyssen-duisburg-100.html>

In the **Regional Association Saarbrücken**, which is characterised by disproportionately high unemployment, we looked particularly at the city districts of Burbach (highest proportion of SGB-II welfare benefits in the city)<sup>26</sup> and Brebach (where the Halberg Guss cast iron foundry closed in summer 2020),<sup>27</sup> as well as the Quierschied-Sulzbach-Friedrichsthal triangle (with its coal and steel, and automobile industry, outmigration and aging population). We were interested in places facing a particular challenge within Saarland, which already has a lot of experience with structural change – and especially with the almost concurrent decline in the importance of mining, the steel industry and automotive manufacturing.<sup>28</sup>

The interviewers in **Western Pomerania-Greifswald** surveyed people mainly in Pasewalk (where Fleisch und Wurstwaren GmbH [Meat and Sausage Products Ltd] went bankrupt in 2017<sup>29</sup>), Torgelow (which has the highest proportion of households on low incomes and old-age poverty, and the lowest proportion of highly qualified people in the district; also the bankruptcy of the iron foundry in 2020<sup>30</sup>

and the upholstery factory in 2021<sup>31</sup>) and Wolgast (which has the highest proportion of child and youth poverty, and SGB-II welfare recipients in the district).

## SELECTED RESPONDENTS

When selecting respondents – the third step – we attempted to have a balance of interviewees by sex, age group and housing situation (whether living in single or multi-occupancy dwellings). Between 31 May and 23 June 2021 we had 217 participants:

- sex: 106 (48.4%) women, 107 (49.8%) men, 3 (1.4%) sex not indicated, 1 (0.4%) 'gender diverse';
- average age: 48.6 years;
- location of interviews: 106 in eastern Germany, 111 in western Germany;
- background: 44 persons (20.3%) immigrant background;
- housing situation: 75 (34.6%) lived in single occupancy dwellings, 93 (43.2%) in multi-occupancy dwellings, 18 (8.3%) in a large apartment block or prefabricated building,<sup>32</sup>
- education: 92 (42.4%) had completed vocational training, 29 (13.4%) had completed primary school education, 28 (12.9%) had a *Diplom* or Bachelor degree, 20 (9.2%) had an intermediate school-leaving certificate, 16 (7.4%) had the German *Abitur*, 14 (6.5%) had a polytechnic degree, 10 (4.6%) had a *Magister* or Master degree, 4 (1.8%) indicated 'other', 3 (1.4%) had no school-leaving qualification and 1 (0.5%) had a doctorate degree.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Regionalverband Saarbrücken, Sozialbericht 2016 [Social Report 2016], Saarbrücken 2017, available at: [https://www.regionalverband-saarbruecken.de/fileadmin/RVSB/Soziales/Sozialbericht\\_2016.pdf](https://www.regionalverband-saarbruecken.de/fileadmin/RVSB/Soziales/Sozialbericht_2016.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Volker Meyer zu Tittingdorf, Gusswerke Saarbrücken werden Ende Juni geschlossen [Saarbrücken Foundries to Close at the End of June], 3 June 2020, available at: [https://www.saarbruecker-zeitung.de/saarland/saar-wirtschaft/brebacher-giesserei-gusswerke-saarbruecken-werden-ende-juni-geschlossen\\_aid-51456603](https://www.saarbruecker-zeitung.de/saarland/saar-wirtschaft/brebacher-giesserei-gusswerke-saarbruecken-werden-ende-juni-geschlossen_aid-51456603)

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Wolfgang Wirtz-Nentwig, Fiesta war einmal [There Used to be a Fiesta], 17 November 2020, available at: <https://www.tagesschau.de/wirtschaft/autogipfel-saarland-101.html>

<sup>29</sup> See Rainer Marten, Was wird aus Pasewalks großem Fleischbetrieb? [What Will Become of Pasewalk's Big Meat Plant?], 20 August 2019, available at: <https://www.nordkurier.de/pasewalk/was-wird-aus-pasewalks-groessem-fleischbetrieb-2036487008.html>

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Norddeutscher Rundfunk, Eisengießerei Torgelow: Geschäftsführer optimistisch [CEO Optimistic about the Torgelow Iron Foundry], 3 April 2021, available at: <https://www.ndr.de/nachrichten/mecklenburg-vorpommern/Eisengiesserei-Torgelow-Geschaeftsfuehrer-optimistisch,eisengiesserei138.html>

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Christian Johner, Mutterkonzern will Torgelower Polstermöbel endgültig schließen [Parent Company Finally Intends to Close Torgelow Upholstery], 4 March 2021, available at: <https://www.nordkurier.de/ueckermuende/torgelower-polstermoebel-stehen-vor-dem-aus-0442653503.html>

<sup>32</sup> 31 respondents were interviewed outside on the street.



## 4

## FINDINGS

In the course of the 217 interviews in the four regions we asked respondents ten open questions on the future at a personal and regional level, and for society as a whole. The questions centred on people's desires and worries, and their assessment of political actors and institutions and their ability to meet present and future challenges (see questionnaire in the appendix).<sup>33</sup> As expected, the answers were as heterogeneous as the group of participants. The various replies can nevertheless be condensed into three main narratives, which contain the key messages:

- **The first narrative centres on the present:** the respondents' interpretations of the Great Transformation point to a discrepancy between the acknowledged fundamental urgency of climate policy, on one hand, and local concerns and needs – primarily social in nature – on the other (4.1). The fact that people recognise the environmental crisis does not mean that they attach a high priority to it in their everyday lives.
- **The second narrative is about the future:** previous experiences of transformation have cast a long shadow, which shapes the interpretation of future challenges, so social factors dominate the second interpretation of the Great Transformation (4.2).
- **The third narrative focuses on the process:** notwithstanding a trust in democracy in principle, we found there was a fundamental scepticism regarding political decision-makers (4.3).

All three narratives we identified are imbued with ambivalence.

#### 4.1 THE PRESENT: THE CLIMATE CRISIS IS A PROBLEM, BUT OUR SOCIAL PROBLEMS ARE MORE URGENT

The data show that the climate crisis exercises the minds of the inhabitants of structurally weak areas, who regard it as one of the most important collective challenges. Asked about Germany's biggest challenges, around a quarter of respondents in the four regions mentioned climate and environmental protection (see figure 2). For most of them

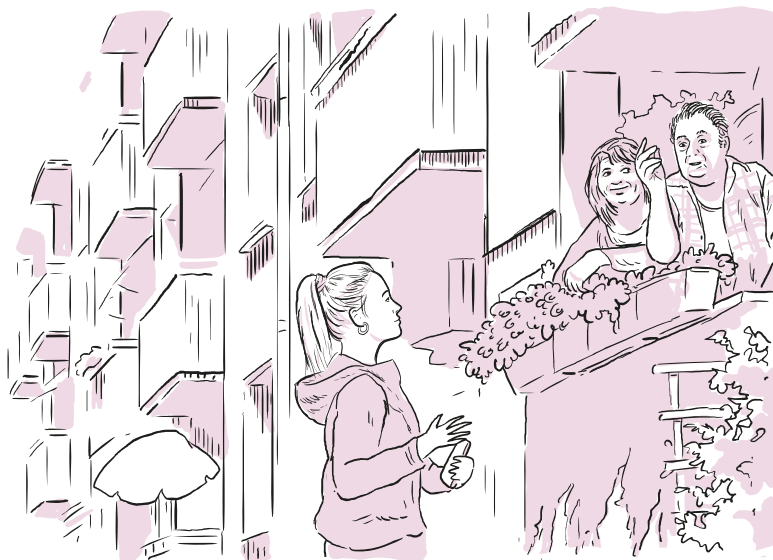
this is synonymous with fighting climate change, especially decarbonising the economy and the energy sector. This tends to be linked to a demand for comprehensive government measures and for politicians to take active responsibility. Fearing economic losses at national level, other respondents emphasised the need for greater international efforts.

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“Climate change, sure, I think. [...] That's probably the most important issue. But it shouldn't only be Germany that has to make all the changes. Isn't there that Paris Climate Agreement? Everybody should have to stick to it. Everyone pulling in the same direction, that's important.”  
- MAN (AGE 36) FROM PASEWALK

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However, the significance attached to the topic of climate protection at national level does not correspond to local or regional perspectives. These are dominated by deep-rooted fears that people's home region is being left behind economically, infrastructurally and demographically (see

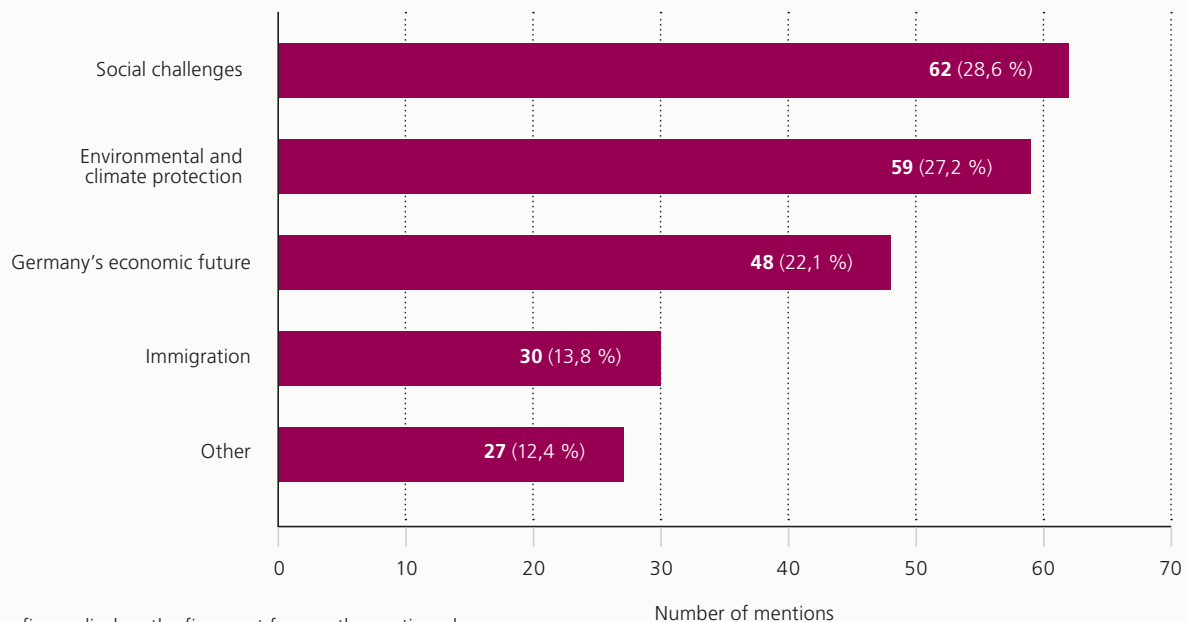


<sup>33</sup> Available on the project website at: <https://www.progressives-zentrum.org/disregarded/?lang=en>

FIGURE 2

### What respondents thought would be Germany's greatest future challenges\*

217 respondents in total



4.2). The keyword 'climate' was not mentioned once, and the term 'environment' was used only sporadically by residents of Thalheim in Bitterfeld, who were worried about severe pollutants from local industry. When asked what people want for their region in the future, climate and the environment hardly featured. Instead, basic needs such as better local transport links, expansion of local infrastructure or the revival of local cultural or leisure-time facilities dominated.

**There is thus a considerable discrepancy between collective-(inter)national and personal-regional perceptions of problems. Diverging priorities and urgency are attached to climate change and environmental protection at different levels.** But why is that? In one respect we are dealing with something that affects society as a whole. For example, in a representative survey conducted by Infratest Dimap for ARD-DeutschlandTrend in summer 2021 the topic climate/environment was ranked

as the most important political problem in Germany (by 33% of respondents).<sup>34</sup> Another survey, this time conducted by the Mannheim election research group (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen) at the behest of the ZDF Politbarometer, at almost the same time, found that social justice was the most important issue when it came to voting in an election (51% of respondents), with climate protection ranking second by a considerable distance (39%).<sup>35</sup> Thus it is clear that Germans are worried about climate change, but that it is only partially relevant in voters' narrower everyday lives.

However, the discrepancy between the collective-(inter)national and the personal-regional ranking of the climate and environmental crisis can also be explained by looking at the context of the target regions. From the standpoint of residents of structurally weak areas the regional situation, which for years or even decades has been characterised by constant change and far-reaching socioeconomic and demographic upheavals, shapes their views on present and future transformation. In simple terms, existing problems are shaping perceptions of the looming transformation. Until people's fundamental needs are catered to in these regions, climate and environmental protection take second place.

#### Do the answers given in the four survey regions differ?

Respondents in Bitterfeld-Wolfen and Duisburg and Bochum perceived social issues as the biggest challenge for the future; in the Regional Association Saarbrücken and Western Pomerania-Greifswald, by contrast, respondents were more concerned about environmental and climate protection. The most frequently mentioned region-related concern about the future in all four regions was fear of their own region being left behind. This concern was strongest in Western Pomerania-Greifswald (72%) and least pronounced in the Regional Association Saarbrücken (43%). In Western Pomerania-Greifswald respondents most often mentioned more cultural and leisure-time facilities, while in Bitterfeld-Wolfen and Saarbrücken they primarily wanted more public infrastructure. Unreserved trust in democracy is weakest in Western Pomerania-Greifswald and strongest in Anhalt-Bitterfeld; the need to reform democracy was mentioned most often in Western Pomerania-Greifswald.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Infratest Dimap, Eine repräsentative Studie zur politischen Stimmung im Auftrag der ARD-Tagesthemen und der Tageszeitung Die Welt [A Representative Study on Political Sentiment Commissioned by ARD-Tagesthemen and Die Welt], Berlin, September 2021, Survey period: 30 August to 1 September 2021, p. 10, available at: [https://www.infratest-dimap.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/DT2109\\_Bericht.pdf](https://www.infratest-dimap.de/fileadmin/user_upload/DT2109_Bericht.pdf)

<sup>35</sup> Cf. ZDF-Politbarometer, SPD überholt nach 19 Jahren wieder die Union [SPD Overtakes the CDU/CSU again after 19 years], online 3 September 2021, survey period: 31 August to 2 September 2021, available at: <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/politik/politbarometer-bundestagswahl-spd-union-100.html?slide=20210902-0618-04-1024>

This study thus confirms older sociological findings on a post-materialistic value shift, based on the idea of a hierarchy of needs.<sup>36</sup> This simultaneous acknowledgement and conditionalisation of climate policy can be summarised in the plain realisation: **the climate crisis is a problem, but our social needs are more urgent.**

When asked what they thought were Germany's biggest challenges interviewees cited social justice as more important than climate change (see figure 2). The reasons given were manifold, ranging from lack of societal recognition, through growing financial inequality, to old-age poverty and the erosion of social cohesion. The problems touch above all on issues of justice. Many people think that 'the gap between rich and poor' (woman [age 45] from Quierschied) is getting bigger and bigger and for the self-employed 'it's a constant battle, you have to pay too many taxes' (woman [age 54] from Friedrichsthal). When it comes to provision for old age 'many people who worked hard all their lives are just forgotten' (woman [age 65] from Bitterfeld).

Previous findings perhaps gave a false impression: the respondents actually consider social and material challenges more important than the raw numbers suggest. People seem to have a pretty good idea of how political decision-making affects their own material future, as well as social justice in the country as a whole. First and foremost, manifest worries about the material add-on costs of climate protection policy were mentioned repeatedly. Another key finding is thus that **people expect not simply that the government should get to grips with climate change, but that it do so in a socially sustainable way.** It is striking, however, that virtually no mention was made of a possible positive link between climate protection and social justice, and respondents did not make a connection between potential solutions (such as direct reimbursement in the case of CO2 pricing). Climate policy measures were thus often regarded as, if anything, exacerbating existing social inequalities:

"Yet again, ordinary people have to foot the bill when it comes to climate change or petrol prices. And who depends the most on old cars? People who hardly have anything."

- WOMAN (AGE 72) FROM BITTERFELD

Generally speaking, ideas about social justice also dominated the conversations in other places. For example, when asked about things that currently do not work well in Germany, social fragmentation was cited most often, by 52 people,

along with the lack of social cohesion and social injustices. People are afraid that they 'will have to get a second job in order to make ends meet'; that they will have to 'turn to social security' (woman [age 55] from Wolfen); and that 'the difference between those who have to get by on the minimum wage and those who make the big money' (man [age 67] from Wolfen) is too big; and 'that you have to take out a loan if you want to buy a house. Somehow or other you have to go into debt and can't rely on capital' (woman [age 24] from Quierschied). Asked about the first thing they would do if they went into politics 88 people said that they would try to reduce social inequalities through active redistribution, offering a wide range of proposals. These included raising the minimum wage; equalising the wage gap between old and new federal states; introducing an inter-generational contract, a basic income, a wealth tax and tax reform; and providing more support for families and social care.

It needs to be emphasised, therefore, that as things stand many people in structurally weak regions regard social fragmentation in Germany as a major grievance, one that could be exacerbated by the Great Transformation and by which they themselves are affected, at least to some extent. This preoccupies people more than climate change itself. Furthermore, at the moment climate protection is not regarded as an opportunity. **This shows that regions that were already affected by structural change in the past are acutely aware of social injustices and fear that they will slip down the social ladder.** This is a message that could turn out to be a strength in the democratic process of negotiating the just handling of change – as long as its potential is recognised and used.



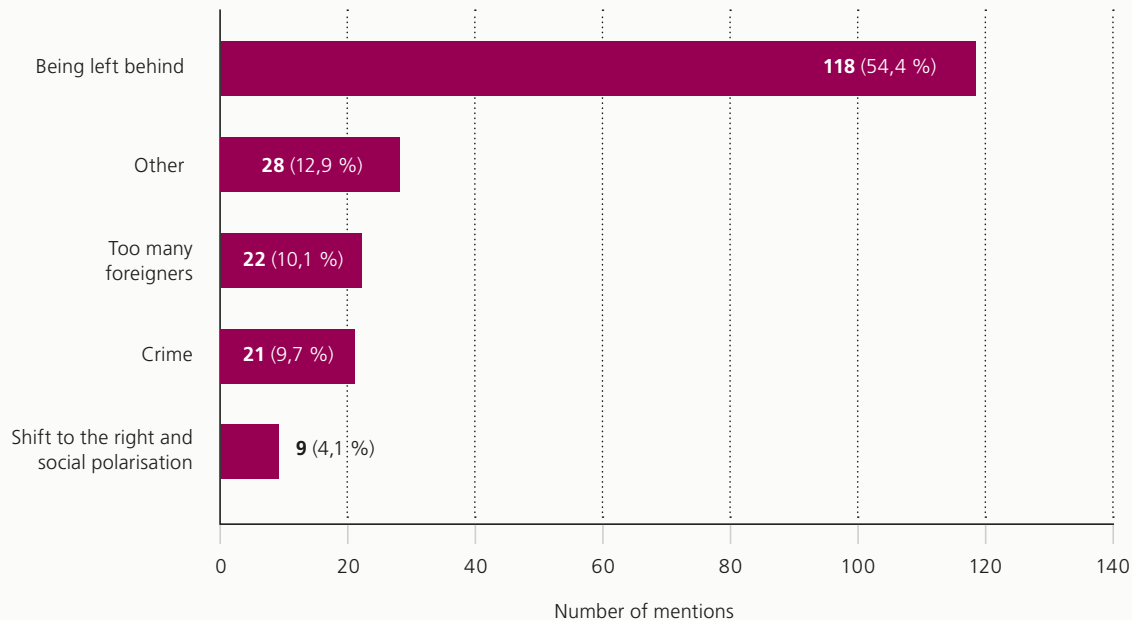
<sup>36</sup> Ronald Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles Among Western Publics*. Princeton, New Jersey 1977.



FIGURE 3

### Respondents' regionally specific worries about the future\*

217 respondents in total



\*The figure displays the five most frequently mentioned answers.

## 4.2 THE FUTURE: I'M NOT WORRIED ABOUT MY FUTURE, BUT ABOUT THE REGION

While the environmental and climate crisis is acknowledged as a national challenge, one thing above all others gives respondents cause for concern when considering the future of their region: falling down the social ladder. They are afraid of no longer belonging to society as a place, and of no longer being able to participate in its life as a person. This goes hand in hand with fearing a collapse in quality of life: shops close down, people move, no medical specialists are available locally, there are potholes in the roads. In the wake of all this social life declines, the area they live in degenerates, crime rates go up and social ghettos emerge. More than half of the interviewees (118) had anxieties about regional exclusion. This is by far the most frequently given answer when respondents were asked about their regionally specific worries about the future (see figure 3).

Particularly striking in connection with region-related fears about the future is how clearly respondents express their concerns about a downward spiral. **People are not afraid that their living environment might be left behind at some point, but that it has already been left behind and that this will not change in the future.** That is probably connected to the fact that the regions are still working through previous structural changes, for example, as a consequence of the decline of the coal and steel industry (in Saarland) or deindustrialisation in the wake of reunification (in Bitterfeld-Wolfen). It seems that people can already see the next big social challenge or even crisis on

the horizon, even before they have fully come to terms with numerous social hardships related to the previous crisis. Such experiences make it harder for people to trust future opportunities and successful (state) structural support measures. For survey respondents, coming to terms with the past shapes the image of the present and how they look to the future. They see the progressive decline of downtown areas ('that affects Sulzbach in particular, there are hardly any shops', woman [age 55] from Sulzbach); young people moving away because they do not have any prospects ('because there's no work here; there's only the chemical industry and not everybody wants that', man [age 24] from Bitterfeld); and in general concerning social interaction and everyday encounters ('there are too few people on the streets. Elderly neighbours say that, too, that in the past...

#### Do younger and older people look at the future differently?

The issue of social divisions was mentioned more often by younger and older respondents than by middle aged people. Primarily older people stated the view that there are few positive developments in Germany. Younger respondents tend to consider demographic change to be a major challenge, along with digitalisation. The environment and the climate, by contrast, were mentioned most often by older people. Asked specifically about regional concerns, especially younger and older respondents were worried about continuing to be left behind. There is a similar trend in relation to people's desire for better public infrastructure in their region. Older people are keener than younger people on having more shopping facilities. There are also age differences in relation to personal concerns. Young people are more fearful of a lack of prospects and opportunities, and accordingly seek material security. Older people worry more often about other people and about their health. Middle aged people (aged 35–64) are mainly afraid of old-age poverty.

everybody was out and about’, man [age 72] from Altwigshagen).

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“Especially in eastern Germany most people have no prospects: older people have already come to terms with that, to some extent. Younger people like me are moving away, however; for example, I’m moving to Berlin. But that makes the outlook even bleaker because nobody is staying. And this hopelessness leads people to vote for right-wing populist parties in elections.”

- MAN (AGE 21) FROM WOLGAST

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Apart from a few other concerns that cannot really be generalised, two further sets of problems were identified that often go together with regional decline: fear of excess immigration and fear of crime. Fear of excess immigration occurred primarily in survey locations with migrant neighbourhoods. The research ranks factors that frequently arise here, such as cultural conflicts, relative deprivation and social disintegration, among typical causes of xenophobic or racist attitudes.<sup>37</sup> Concerns that ‘things are going to the dogs’ (woman [age 48] from Bruckhausen) and about stalling ‘integration of foreigners’ (woman [age 45] from Burbach) are scarcely surprising. This is not about judging whether such perceptions are appropriate or not, just about understanding that they are very much within the horizon of expectations in regions in which social and cultural heterogeneity are not unknown, and in which there are precarious social milieus.

When looking at fear of crime, what is known in social science as the ‘broken windows theory’ is a useful tool.<sup>38</sup> According to this hypothesis there is a connection between the decline of a city neighbourhood and rising crime. When many respondents state their belief that the people in the area ‘adapt themselves to circumstances’ and ‘aren’t so shabby of their own accord’, not to mention the fact that they are ‘afraid to go around there at night’ (woman [age 18] from Duisburg-Meiderich-Beeck) the evidence for these views can be found in those respondents’ statements. They demonstrate that fear of crime and social decline in a region are two sides of the same coin. However, these findings should not be overstated: of the 21 interviewees who

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. Lazaros Miliopoulos, Ursachen für politischen Extremismus [Causes of Political Extremism], in: Eckhard Jesse and Tom Mannewitz (eds), Extremismusforschung. Handbuch für Wissenschaft und Praxis [Researching Extremism. Handbook of Theory and Practice], Baden-Baden 2018, pp. 205–243.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling, Broken Windows, Kriminologisches Journal 28 (1996), pp. 121–137.

mentioned fear of crime, 9 were referring to the neighbourhoods of Duisburg and Bochum we investigated – urban areas. It is known from other studies that fear of crime tends to be higher in urban areas than in rural areas because of the greater anonymity of the population, which hinders informal social control and thus boosts crime levels and negatively affects people’s sense of security there.<sup>39</sup>

It is notable that, despite their fears for the future, very few of those asked have lost hope. Hardly anyone would like ‘to turn the clock back’, is wallowing in nostalgia or wants ‘the good old days’ to come back. This astonishingly optimistic outlook is evident especially in answers to the question about *personal* worries about the future, which were ranked as follows:

- First (78 mentions), over a third of respondents did not express any worries about the future.
- Second (42 mentions) were concerns about other people, about ‘people in general’ (man [age 69] from Bochum), about ‘children’, about whether ‘they will do at least as well as I have’ (man [age 69] from Torgelow), and about ‘relatives’ and their ‘work, pension, income’ (man [age 77] from Grimmen).
- Third (39 mentions) were fears about old-age poverty, for example, not receiving a pension ‘which is enough to pay my rent from’ (man [age 38] from Greppin) and about ‘not being able to pay for the old people’s home’ (woman [age 76] from Pasewalk).
- Finally (33 mentions) came fears of lack of individual prospects, that participants ‘won’t be able to get a job any more’ (man [age 40] from Wolgast), and concerns about one’s health (29 mentions).

The concurrence of regional worries about the future and personal satisfaction can best be summarised as follows: **I’m not afraid about my future, but about the future of the region.**

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“I don’t really have any personal worries.”

- WOMAN (AGE 22) FROM SAARBRÜCKEN-MALSTATT

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“My personal [future]?  
I’m worried about society in general.”

- MAN (AGE 69) FROM BOCHUM

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The contentment felt by many also finds expression in answers to the question about people’s personal wishes for the future. These put people’s own health and the

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. Nina Oelkers, Sicherheit im ländlichen Raum [Safety and Security in Rural Areas], 2016, available at: <https://www.bpb.de/politik/innenpolitik/innere-sicherheit/207263/sicherheit-im-laendlichen-raum>

health of their relatives in first position, by some distance (95 mentions),<sup>40</sup> followed by hopes of material prosperity (46 mentions), a desire for more social cohesion (27 mentions) and other, very specific wishes (45 mentions):

“The main thing is that my children are healthy and so am I.”

- WOMAN (AGE 55) FROM DUISBURG-MARXLOH

**People’s overall optimistic attitude to their own futures despite considerable concerns about the future of the region grows from a remarkable personal resilience among the inhabitants of structurally weak areas.**

Worries about regional disintegration should definitely not be interpreted to suggest that respondents reject change. On the contrary, the current social and economic problems make it particularly clear that change is needed in structurally weak areas. But it is essential that such change has a clear social policy orientation, so that people can be brought on board and geographical inequalities can be

reduced. Accordingly, participants in the study often gave voice to specific and **realistic needs in answer to the question about their wishes for their region. It was not a matter of halting structural change, but of alleviating the resulting problems** (see figure 4). For example, the largest share of respondents want an upgrading of public infrastructure in their region (73 mentions). Public transport connections – including cycle lanes – are mentioned particularly often, as were investments in educational and training institutions (especially day-care centres and schools) and tidy streets: “It would probably be too much to ask for a railway station here, but just a bit more transport planning [would be good], in other words that the bus goes to Saarbrücken and Neunkirchen more often. That would also be better for the environment” (woman [age 24] from Quierschied).

Ranked second is the expansion or restoration of local cultural and leisure-time facilities, especially for young people. People mentioned public playgrounds and sports pitches, youth clubs, parks, but also bars, discos and cafés. People mainly wanted places for socialising. Requests ranged from ‘more leisure-time options... so that people can go out and don’t have to go to the neighbouring city, to Düsseldorf’ (woman [age 22] from Duisburg-Hochfeld), through ‘something for children would be nice’ (woman [age 33] from Pasewalk) to ‘more parks, more green spaces, things like that’ (man [age 18] from Bochum-Laer).

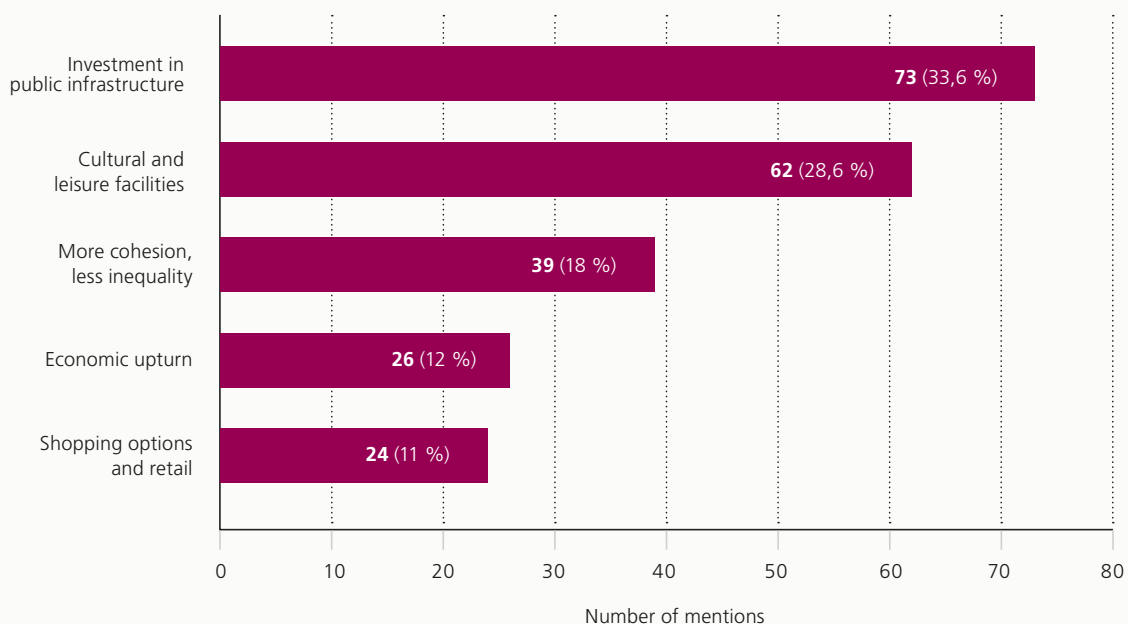
By ‘more social cohesion’ – ranked third on the regional wish list – people mean that they want not only more

<sup>40</sup> The surveys were conducted in June 2021 and thus under the direct influence of the Covid-19 pandemic.

**FIGURE 4**

**Respondents’ specific wishes for the future of their regions\***

217 respondents in total



\*The figure displays the five most frequently mentioned answers.



**Do answers in eastern and in western Germany differ from one another?**

Worries that their region will continue to be left behind are much stronger in eastern than in western Germany (64% versus 39%). Also certain region-related wishes for the future are more pronounced in the east than in the west, specifically for cultural and leisure-time facilities (29% versus 11%) and for more political dialogue (4% versus 0%). Support is also higher here for the AfD and the CDU. In western Germany, by contrast, people more often express a desire for better shopping opportunities in their region (10% versus 5%), and a desire for peace and order (10% versus 2%); a fair number did not express any wishes at all (22% versus 8%). Most respondents in both east and west stated that they do not have any personal worries about the future. Apart from that, the dominant concern in the east is old-age poverty, and in the west, other people. In both regions most respondents, as a personal desire for the future, would like to remain healthy, along with their relatives. Attitudes to democracy and trust in its ability to solve problems are also very similar in eastern and western Germany.

community, solidarity and sharing, but also more support for the socially vulnerable:

“There should be more friendliness on the streets and for caregivers. So generally speaking in everyday interaction, whether at work or in private.”

**- WOMAN (AGE 21) FROM BITTERFELD**

“More support for schools and for children. Above all for people from vulnerable families. They should start from the bottom. So they can learn the language and how to get on. There needs to be intervention in families. Those that don’t get any support from anywhere else. The town centres in Beek or Marxloh should be developed, so it isn’t all so empty and people aren’t ashamed of it.”

**- WOMAN (AGE 18) FROM MEIDERICH-BEECK**

**4.3 THE PROCESS: OUR DEMOCRACY IS STRONG, BUT THOSE AT THE TOP ARE ALL USELESS**

Despite all this, the majority in the structurally weak areas we investigated have not given up on politics. In fact, many were convinced that democracy, despite all its weaknesses, could get to grips with economic and social change (49 mentions). One respondent told us:

“Definitely. Conflicts can also come up with a solution as long as people can reach agreement at some point. It’s OK as it is, only maybe a bit faster, although that’s decided somewhere else.”

**- MAN (AGE 40) FROM WOLGAST**

Although most respondents believed that democracy is capable of handling the Great Transformation, they had some diverse ideas about what they would like to change (99 mentions). There were recurring criticisms that it takes too long to get things done, the lacking ability of politicians to compromise, and that politicians are corrupt and involved in lobbying: “Politics, first of all, there are lots of politicians who are in the wrong job... Politicians pocket the money for years and tell us they’re doing it all for our sake... Write that down: politicians are all just puppets and talk and talk and just tell lies. They don’t tell us what’s really going on... The simple truth is that politicians are all corrupt” (man [age 50] from Saarbrücken-Malstatt).

**In other words, the majority of respondents generally believe that democracy is capable of dealing with transformation. Only a few believe that a different political system would be more capable of tackling future challenges.** At the same time, political resentment and frustration should not be dismissed as mere background noise. That was revealed at many points during the interviews. For example, around a quarter of the respondents expressed a fairly vague discontent with politics when asked for things that currently do not work well in Germany (49 mentions):

“In politics, we’re only ever told the half of it and we never get the truth.”

**- WOMAN (AGE 50) FROM DUISBURG-MARXLOH**

By the same token, almost half cannot really say what they think is going well in Germany at the moment. Particularly noteworthy are the considerable doubts about the representation of citizens in the democratic process. This finding confirms Philip Manow's thesis that we are living through 'not a crisis of democracy but a crisis of democratic representation'.<sup>41</sup> This shows up in respondents' considerable aversion to political parties and overall in relation to 'those in charge'. Just under half of the respondents (107 mentions) rejected the idea that politicians or parties, generally speaking, address people's interests. This attitude demonstrates a fairly simple way of looking at things: **our democracy is strong, but those in charge are all useless.**

Such reserve might be surprising, at first glance. In surveys on trust in various political institutions, political parties have long come off badly across the whole population, whether because people do not feel represented by any party or because their expectations have been constantly disappointed.<sup>42</sup> The lack of comparative data means that we cannot really tell whether the mistrust in party politics in structurally weak regions is relatively high or low, but research findings tend to suggest the former.

To some extent this frustration conceals quite specific admonitions, such as a lack of responsiveness from politicians, a lack of accessibility to them, and a sense that respondents have been politically abandoned. Many took the view that no one really cares about their concerns and interests and that most politicians are guided mainly by their own interests and ego:

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"I don't take any interest in politics.  
Everything's decided without us anyway.  
We don't have any say."  
- WOMAN (AGE 61) FROM BOCHUM-LAER

Many inhabitants of structurally weak regions evidently regret the lack of politicians with a regional connection, people who care. Accordingly, around a fifth of respondents (40 mentions), when asked what they would do differently if they had some political power, mentioned introducing policies better adapted to the future, improving political processes, abolishing lobbying, reducing parliamentary allowances, improving accessibility and encouraging more young people to be involved in politics.

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. Philip Manow, (Ent-)Demokratisierung der Demokratie, ein Essay [(De-)democratisation of Democracy, an Essay], Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, Bonn 2021, p. 120.

<sup>42</sup> See Bertelsmann Stiftung (ed.), Schwindendes Vertrauen in Politik und Parteien. Eine Gefahr für den gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhalt? [Dwindling Trust in Politics and Parties. Endangering Social Cohesion?], Gütersloh 2019, pp. 70–77.

Many regard politicians as under an obligation: 'they should come to us'. The lack of interest in other parties and in the government's policies has been used strategically by right-wing populist parties, such as the AfD, to establish themselves as people's parties and representatives of the 'little man', as suggested by two interviewees from Bitterfeld-Wolfen:

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"Right now before the federal elections I'd like to see a wider presence of different parties. In Bitterfeld only the CDU and the AfD are visible in the marketplace. Other parties should also be on the street so that people get the opportunity to exchange views with and inform themselves about other politicians and programmes than the centre-right and the right."  
- WOMAN (AGE 25) FROM GREPPIN

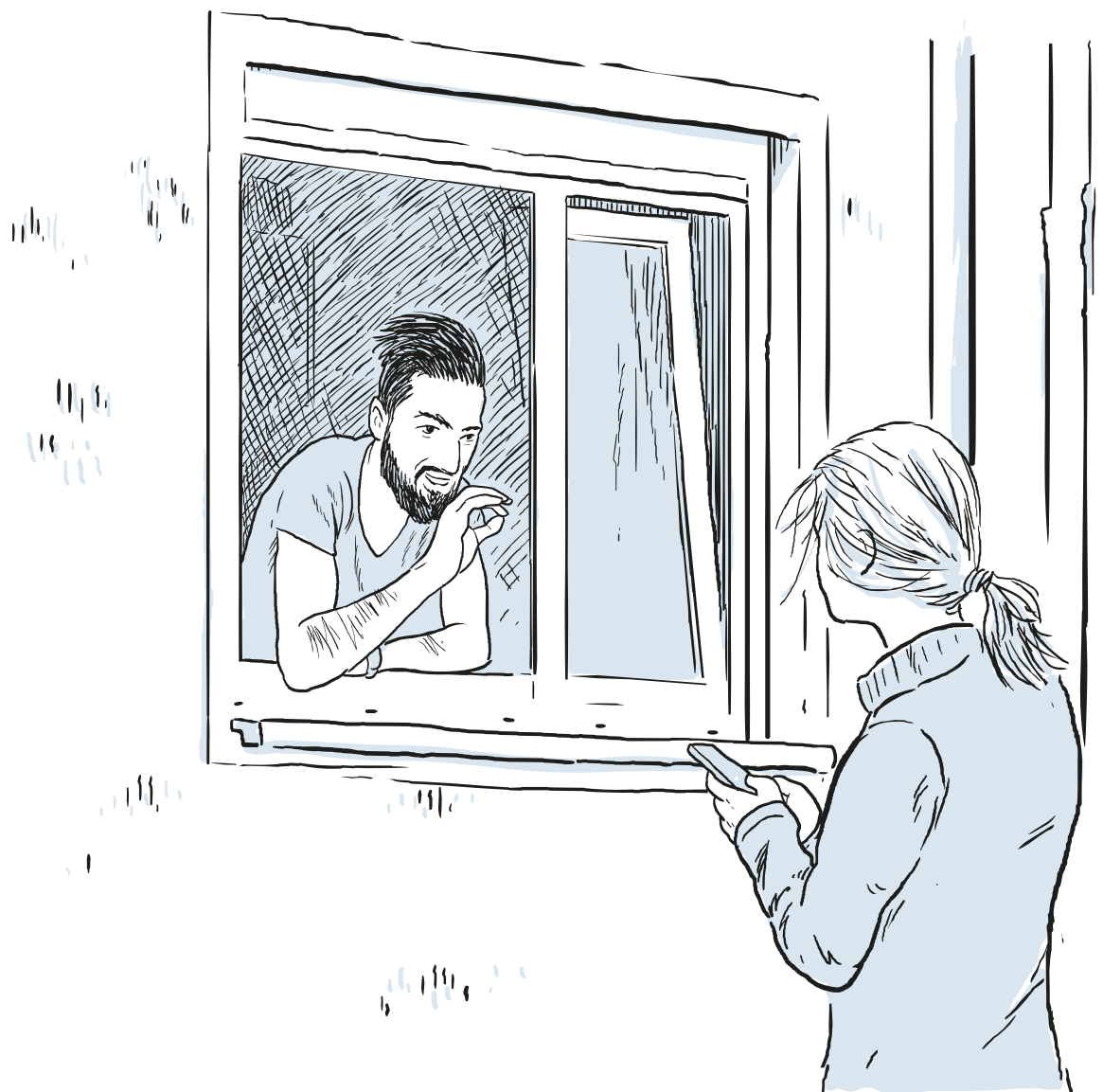
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"It's true that the AfD is accessible. They stand there in the marketplace in Bitterfeld the whole year round and talk to people, they are always there. What comes out of it I don't know. I've never talked to them. I'd like to see the CDU do the same, to stand there in the market, and not just at election time."  
- MAN (AGE 38) FROM GREPPIN

The fact that, despite their considerable scepticism about politicians and parties, people are not allowing themselves to lapse into doom and gloom or political disenchantment is shown by the intention of many of them, at the time of the interviews, to vote in Germany's 2021 federal election. Leaving aside the non-voters, who make up 15% of our sample (33 mentions), a substantial proportion, at least in principle, still see something in one of the Bundestag parties.

Summarising, we can say that even if political actors' integrity and competence are called into question, trust in the democratic system remains high and people are still prepared to participate in politics. There is also a desire for change and to help shape things, which can be discerned in the answers to the question of what people would do if they were in charge. That means that the main conditions

for the inclusive and just management of the Great Transformation in structurally weak areas are in place. Whether and to what extent this potential is taken advantage of not only depends on local people, but also requires political will. In the next section we look at what politics has to offer the inhabitants of structurally weak areas.



## 5

## POSSIBLE POLICY SOLUTIONS TO TACKLE THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION IN STRUCTURALLY WEAK AREAS

The Great Transformation requires far-reaching changes in all regions. In order to achieve societal majorities and overall acceptance of these changes as well as to reinforce social cohesion, fighting regional disparities must be high on the political agenda. When prioritising reduction of regional imbalances, political recognition of the emergence of right-wing populism and nationalism in structurally weak regions is essential. From an economic standpoint there are two main reasons for these increasing regional imbalances. First, new technologies favour the concentration of highly technologised and knowledge-intensive sectors in metropolitan regions and the relocation of highly qualified jobs to economically highly developed centres. The introduction of new technologies brings down business costs. For example, medium- and low-qualified jobs are being substituted by what were previously high-qualified jobs in Europe's traditional industrial centres. Second, long-term regional trends, such as adverse demographic development, lack of innovation, and formal and informal institutions, and insufficient capacity to cope with change, are causing some rural areas to fall behind.<sup>43</sup> In other words, while metropolitan areas are booming, other regions are lagging; rural regions and former industrial centres are becoming estranged from knowledge-intensive urban centres. At the same time, decision-makers are increasingly having to confront familiar social challenges from the past, such as a lack of affordable housing or rethinking mobility and transport concepts.

As a consequence of these trends regional imbalances have developed into serious political challenges 'that can no longer be ignored'.<sup>44</sup> Just how urgent political solutions to these problems are can be discerned from the success of the – in part – right-wing extremist AfD in structurally weak regions, especially where even well trained skilled workers are worried about their future and people generally feel that they are 'second-class citizens'.<sup>45</sup> This is particularly

evident in the results of the Landtag elections in Brandenburg and Saxony in 2019. The AfD was able to win 15 direct mandates in the predominantly structurally weak regions in the east of both federal states and a total of 23.5% and 27.5%, respectively, of second votes. And although the AfD's core issue of immigration played only a modest role in the 2021 federal election the party was still able – despite losses of 2.3% – to consolidate its share of the vote. It was particularly successful in eastern Germany and where the CDU suffered historic losses. There the AfD's tally of direct mandates soared from 3 to 16, all in structurally weak regions<sup>46</sup> (see figure 5 and 6 on the results of the 2017 and 2021 federal elections in structurally weak regions in Germany).

Although both the progressive and the conservative camps are well aware that increasing regional inequalities are playing into the hands of the right-wing populists the political response has so far been rather limited. The cultivation of equal living conditions, however, is enshrined in the Basic Law and – at least verbally – one of the key objectives of every federal government.<sup>47</sup> With its support scheme for the whole of Germany, the creation of public sector jobs and investments in broadband, infrastructure and social provision the Grand Coalition took a first step in the right direction.<sup>48</sup> The Structural Development Act (*Strukturstärkungsgesetz*) has established the right incentives for transitioning from coal and ushering in the socio-ecological transformation. But to date, as when introducing individual measures to establish equal living conditions, it has clearly fallen short. **There is no overall strategy to develop and implement future-oriented, robust ideas on tackling the Great Transformation for local people and with their input.** We need a strategy to use structural development tools in tandem with sustainability and other for-

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Simona Iammarino, Andrés Rodríguez-Pose, Michael Storper, Regional Inequality in Europe: Evidence, Theory and Policy Implications, 13 July 2018, available at: <https://voxeu.org/article/regional-inequality-europe>

<sup>44</sup> Cf. The Economist, Place-based Economic Policies as a Response to Populism, 15 December 2016, available at: <https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2016/12/15/place-based-economic-policies-as-a-response-to-populism>

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Jan Bielicki, Das Gefühl, zu kurz zu kommen [A Sense of Losing Out], 2 September 2019, available at: <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/wahlanalyse-das-gefuehl-zu-kurz-zu-kommen-1.4584825>

<sup>46</sup> all except Gera.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Fedor Ruhose and Dominic Schwickert, Vier Vorschläge für eine bessere Heimatpolitik [Four Proposals for a Better Home Policy], 31 October 2019, available at: <https://www.welt.de/debatte/kommentare/article202755332/Strukturschwache-Regionen-Vier-Vorschlaege-fuer-eine-bessere-Heimatpolitik.html>

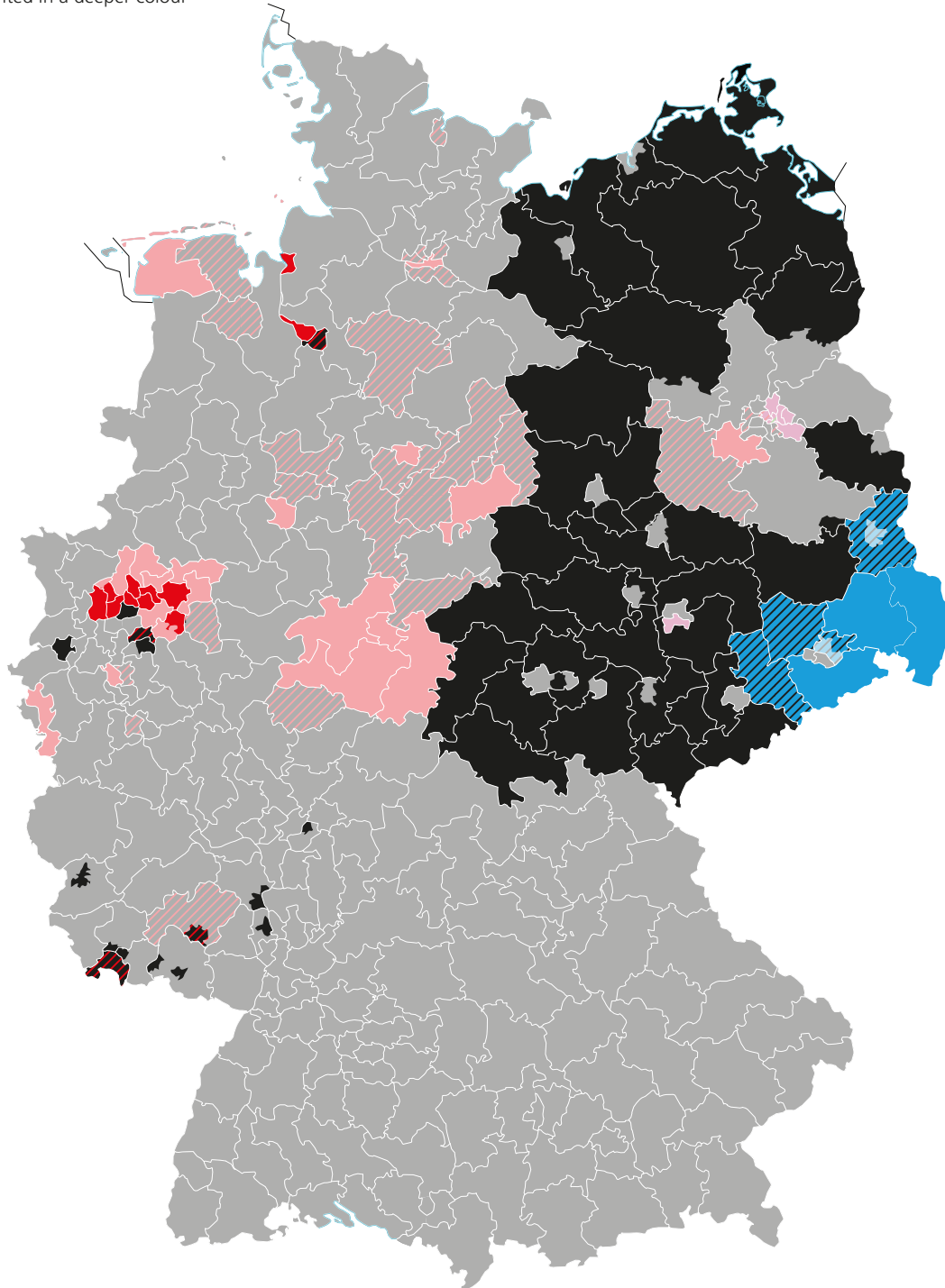
<sup>48</sup> See Federal Government, Politik für gleichwertige Lebensverhältnisse: Zwischenbilanz der 19. Legislaturperiode [Policy for Equal Living Conditions: Interim Report on the 19th Legislative Period], available at: [https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/downloads/DE/veroeffentlichungen/2021/04/zwischenbericht-gleichwertige-lebensverhaeltnisse.pdf?\\_\\_blob=publicationFile&v=7](https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/downloads/DE/veroeffentlichungen/2021/04/zwischenbericht-gleichwertige-lebensverhaeltnisse.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=7)

FIGURE 5

### How did structurally weak regions vote in 2017?

Results of the Bundestag election by constituency (first and second votes)

Structurally weak regions are highlighted in a deeper colour



Graphic: Bundestagswahl 2017 Erststimmenergebnisse.svg (adapted) by Furfur on [Wikipedia Commons](#) licensed under [CC-BY SA 4.0](#).  
 Source of other data: ARD (Tagesschau) | Source: structurally weak regions: see figure 1

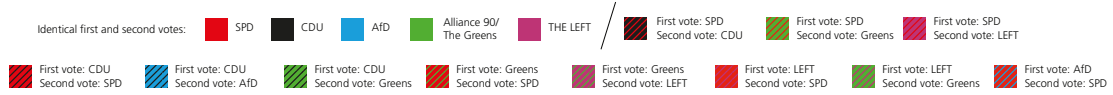
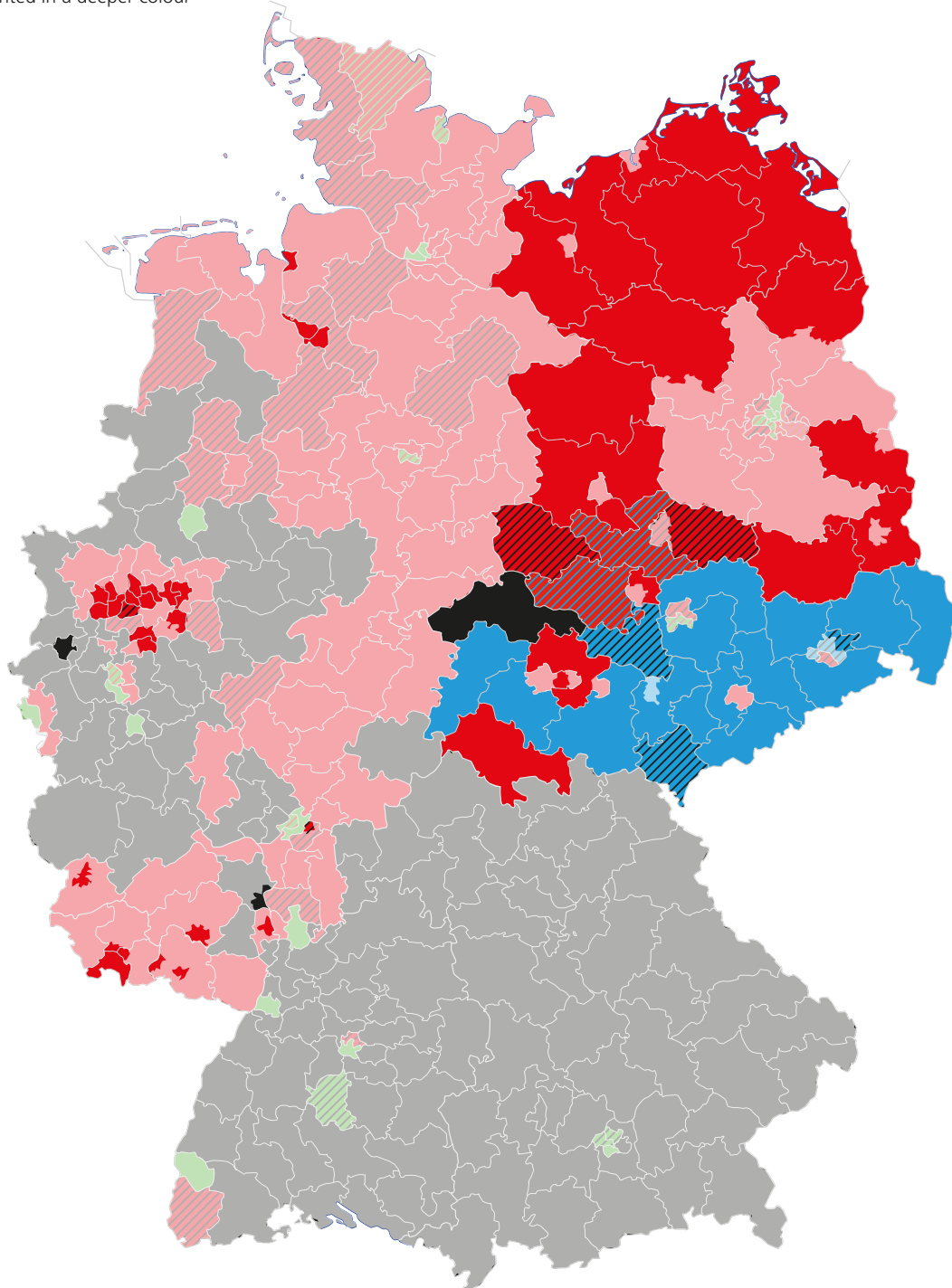


**FIGURE 6**

**How did structurally weak regions vote in 2021?**

Results of the Bundestag election by constituency (first and second votes)

Structurally weak regions are highlighted in a deeper colour



Graphic: Erststimmenmehrheiten Bundestagswahl 2021.svg (adapted) by Furfur on Wikipedia Commons licensed under CC-BY SA 4.0.  
Source of other data: ARD (Tagesschau) | Source: structurally weak regions: see figure 1.

ward-looking indicators. And without citizen-centred ideas for developing new funding projects with local initiatives it will be much harder to tackle the political challenges, also in competition with right-wing populists.

A convincing proposition on how the necessary changes are to be made is therefore indispensable, as was evident in the federal election campaign in 2021. At one event, Annalena Baerbock, co-leader of the Greens, was asked ‘What do you propose to do for rural areas?’.<sup>49</sup> The question came from Uwe Andreas, mayor of Sachsendorf, a small community in Brandenburg, near the Polish border. On his own account, he had stood for office in order to keep the AfD candidate out. The 465-person community faces major social and political challenges. The highroad needs to be repaired and the school bus only comes once a day. Furthermore, since the transition from communism virtually all the shops have disappeared. ‘And now Sachsendorfers are supposed to pay higher petrol prices and put solar panels on their roofs for the benefit of the community’, he said, exasperatedly. Who is supposed to pay for that? The implicit question here is, what does politics have to offer in this situation to people who either do not want to move into the city or cannot.

In response to the challenges Uwe Andreas described, the Greens’ candidate for chancellor said she wanted to devote more public resources to investments in infrastructure, health care and municipal debt reduction. Variations of this financial policy approach could be found in the election programmes of the SPD, the FDP, Die Linke and the CDU. For all the differences in priorities and proposed measures the following considerations stand out:

1. The terms ‘rural areas’ and ‘structurally weak’ are often used synonymously, at least implicitly. Although many rural areas are in fact structurally weak there are plenty of regions in Germany to which only one of these two terms applies. We therefore urgently require a more differentiated view if answers are to be found to specifically local challenges. In particular, regions that cannot be classified as rural but are structurally weak might easily be neglected. Election programmes often include proposals to improve rural areas, but little is said about structurally weak regions. Furthermore, rural regions that are today regarded as structurally robust could become structurally weak in the wake of the Great Transformation (for example, in southern Germany where some regions depend on big auto suppliers and specialise in combustion engine manufacture). Similarly, structurally weak regions could become structurally robust, for example, by expanding hydrogen industries in the north.
2. Economically underdeveloped areas are defined mainly by their problems and shortcomings.

3. Most solutions are limited to infrastructural (or material) measures or material incentive systems, such as CO<sub>2</sub> pricing (for example, expanding digital networks or the transport infrastructure, giving debt relief to municipalities, investing in local companies and establishing research centres). Although boosting local volunteering is sometimes mentioned, or there are calls for meeting places that might enable local residents to have their say, such intangible considerations tend to be the exception.
4. Political parties overwhelmingly identify the economy and above all the automobile industry as the strategic drivers of the socio-ecological transformation at national level. Although other important branches of industry are also mentioned, and urban areas are regarded as drivers of transformation, to date structurally weak areas have not been regarded as fertile soil for transformation processes. Now and then the political programmes of democratic parties contain proposals such as to introduce ‘transformation centres as workshops of change’ or ‘transformation dialogue’. Similarly, the need to promote locally based firms is mentioned (through ‘transformation funds’) or to implement training measures (‘short-time benefits during transformation’). Although the regions in which economically and socially intensive changes are looming are considered to be key venues of structural change, they do not appear to be regarded as active strategic partners in meeting the challenges. **The strengthening of structurally weak areas, apart from the abovementioned proposals, is regarded as a separate task, instead of treating it as an integral part of a future-oriented transformation policy.**

This understanding scarcely does justice to the significance of structurally weak areas for the upcoming upheavals, and harbours the risk of drawing hasty conclusions. Trends that only exacerbate regional inequalities are promptly instrumentalised by anti-democrats in an attempt to take political advantage. The AfD is already claiming that, in the guise of the ‘Great Transformation’, an alleged redistribution is being prepared at the expense of the so-called *Mittelstand* (roughly: small- and mid-sized enterprises) to the detriment of Germany’s international competitiveness. They speak of ‘politically initiated structural disruption’.<sup>50</sup>

Intensive packages of measures have been put in place to tackle these inequalities, but they are concentrated largely on infrastructural solutions in coal-mining regions and CO<sub>2</sub> pricing. It remains uncertain whether this approach of putting in place intensive and participatory measures to tackle inequalities can be transposed to other regions. There have so far been no participatory approaches that accept that although the affected regions and their inhabitants are malfunctioning (structurally weak), they are also valuable (rich in experience).

<sup>49</sup> ZDF, ‘Klartext, Frau Baerbock! Das ZDF-Wahlforum mit der Kanzlerkandidatin von Bündnis 90 und Die Grünen’ [In Plain Words, Ms Baerbock! ZDF Election Forum with the Candidate for Chancellor of Alliance 90 and The Greens], broadcast on 16 September 2021.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. AfD, Für einen ‘Blue Deal’ [In Favour of a ‘Blue Deal’], available at: <https://www.afd.de/wahlprogramm-wirtschaft-arbeit/>

## 6

## RECOMMENDED ACTIONS: MONEY, ABILITY TO SET THE AGENDA AND VOICE

From our conversations on doorsteps we identified three interpretative frames with regard to the Great Transformation in structurally weak regions. It is clear from this that the respondents regard themselves as people affected by change, but not as actors with a say in shaping it. Our three recommendations are aimed at bringing a climate-friendly economy in line with people and their needs, taking challenges and risks into consideration, along with capacities and potential. **By giving people money, the ability to set the agenda and voice**, trust in the process can be cultivated, and structurally weak regions can be strengthened in such a way that equal living conditions can be fostered there.

### RECOMMENDATION 1: INVEST MONEY IN THE REGIONAL ENERGY ECONOMY AND CITIZENS' EVERYDAY LIVES

No one doubted the reality of man-made climate change in our doorstep conversations. People we spoke to attached major importance to a policy of active and consistent climate protection at national level, but ranked the issue differently for local and regional levels. Until fundamental local needs are met, climate and environmental protection are regarded as secondary concerns. However, climate protection and local social needs are not considered to be independent of one another: there are clear concerns that the consequences of climate policy could exacerbate social ills and disadvantages.

In response to local people's acceptance of the climate crisis there should also be an acceptance of their social concerns. The worry that climate policy could negatively affect their own region and future could be tackled with measures that confer real benefits on these regions or individuals. The form in which these measures are to be implemented needs to be considered, and in eastern Germany there is scepticism concerning state transformation measures because of experiences during the political and economic transition.<sup>51</sup> Hence we offer two proposals to consider before implementation.

First, we propose to leverage the potential of structurally weak rural regions with regard to their possible location advantage: there is usually a lot of unused space. There are various plans for sustainable energy generation, such as wind power and solar plants, for which a lot of space is required for building and expansion. Strengthening structurally weak regions as locations for sustainable energy generation requires investments in physical infrastructure, above all connections to new power lines, acceleration of digitalisation and well trained specialist workers. A key condition is that municipalities be enabled to invest in the local energy economy – perhaps by means of targeted debt relief or direct participation of structurally weak areas in the profits of energy generation. For example, the profits of such plants could flow directly into public investments in education, social provision or regional transport. Prioritisation of the energy economy is not a panacea for every region, however. It depends on local location factors (specialised workers, infrastructure, knowledge), as well as how the local economy can be reinforced within the framework of the Great Transformation. Renewable energies are one way to boost local economies, but associated industries in the area of sectoral coupling – such as new technologies for reducing fossil fuels in other sectors, such as green hydrogen, e-mobility and batteries, heat pumps and so on – have considerable potential.

Second, we suggest providing direct investment opportunities for residents of structurally weak regions. Many respondents could scarcely imagine investing in the future and the climate while they are worried and uncertain about everyday social needs. Direct investment opportunities tailored to their income situations could help residents. The objective is to promote climate-friendly measures in people's everyday lives. These might include:

- defraying the costs of house renovation, for example, paying savings on heating as leasing fees (flat-rate);
- offering to exchange cars with combustion engines for small electric cars and to repay the monthly costs of the old cars;
- expanding solar power and thermal heating plants, paying previous electricity costs as leasing fees;
- per capita disbursement from CO2 pricing to lower and middle income groups.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Steffen Mau, Lütten-Klein: *Leben in der ostdeutschen Transformationsgesellschaft* [Lütten-Klein: *Living in the Eastern German Transformation Society*], Berlin 2019.

It is clear in relation to both proposals that not only the better-off in economically successful regions would benefit from transformation and that everybody would find it simple and feasible to have their say on transformation.

## RECOMMENDATION 2: EMPOWER RESIDENTS AND AREAS THROUGH REGIONAL TRANSFORMATION CLUSTERS TO SET THE AGENDA OF CHANGE

People's worries about their region's future, widespread in structurally weak areas, are rooted in subjective perceptions of a twofold insignificance: tangible material insignificance and intangible insignificance. Tangible material insignificance is evident to people when they observe their immediate environment lose importance and fall into a spiral of degradation: firms and people move away, social infrastructure dwindles, and mobility options shrink. Intangible insignificance is evident both in public discourse (regional representatives rarely appear on talk shows, or there is little news reporting on a local region at national level) and in relation to opportunities to set the agenda and propose solutions. Only few inhabitants feel that they are involved in developing their own future. They feel that they are merely the objects of change, not actors shaping it.

This brings us to the conclusion that both forms of perceived insignificance need to be tackled in their own way. For example, some relief could be given to municipal coffers to enable infrastructural investments or to provide more local citizens' consultations so that people feel that they are being listened to. However, such a selective approach, in which financial and social measures are dealt with separately, would be inadequate to the circumstances, in which the challenges form a coherent whole. **Rather the democratic promises of equality and justice should be addressed together, looking at both process (code-termination, transparency, access to information and agencies) and results (equal living conditions).**

Regions already undergoing upheaval or in which major change is already looming, thus need, besides targeted investments (money), broad opportunities to have a say (empowerment), so that their region becomes known not for the negative accompaniments of transformation, but for the opportunities it opens up. One instrument that could be deployed to address such regional transformation processes is the 'transformation cluster', for institutions whose recommendation and consultation bodies would include broad swathes of regional society and reflect multifaceted environments, such as firms, works councils, academia, politics, employees of social and cultural institutions, and citizens.<sup>52</sup> For example, people have more confidence that representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or consumer protection organisations will behave ethically than governments, companies or the media.

<sup>52</sup> One implementation approach is the „Rat zur Gestaltung und Begleitung des Strukturwandels“ [Council for Shaping and Accompaniment of Structural Change (Transformation Council)] in Rhineland-Palatinate.

Representatives from these organisations usually enjoy more trust among the population, too.<sup>53</sup> The involvement of these actors would therefore not only significantly improve the prospects of success, but perhaps also help gain the confidence of local people. Depending on the regional circumstances, and within the framework of climate policy goals, the task of such institutions would be to discuss social, workplace and cultural solutions and to make recommendations. Besides other procedures in the parliamentary process, the proposals of the cluster would serve as a basis for the future allocation of regional resources, for example, in the context of structural support. Transformation clusters are already mentioned in the 'traffic-light' parties' coalition agreement,<sup>54</sup> linked to the intention of supporting structurally weak regions. The ample provision of money, clout and personnel is as important here as the fostering of active participation mentioned above.

Existing instruments that bring investments into regions affected by negative effects of transformation, such as the Structural Development Act for coal-mining regions, should, besides monetary contributions, enable broad local participation. By contrast, familiar, but only moderately effective approaches, such as complicated online portals on which citizens were supposed to submit their ideas, have not proved their worth. Instead, successful examples of out-reaching participation could inspire a deepening of the visible, robust and diverse involvement of societal groups. The concept of social focal points to strengthen local cohesion suggests that shaping transformations through empowerment should turn away from project thinking in the direction of process thinking.<sup>55</sup>

To summarise, investments in structurally weak regions to alleviate inequalities should not be exclusively of a material nature. There should also be investment in experience and trust. This happens first and foremost by empowering people within their own living environment. Diverse social groups should tackle change in their region together. Regional processes of societal negotiation concerning spending, tasks and steps should take place in trustworthy locations and in institutionalised form. In that way, they would not only ensure that the necessary investments are made, but also create a bridge between politics and the key actors of transformation, and render both the costs and the benefits visible and transparent.

<sup>53</sup> Edelman Trust Barometer 2021, available at: [https://www.edelman.de/sites/g/files/aatuss401/files/2021-02/2021%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer\\_Germany%20Country%20Report\\_0.pdf](https://www.edelman.de/sites/g/files/aatuss401/files/2021-02/2021%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer_Germany%20Country%20Report_0.pdf)

<sup>54</sup> Cf. SPD, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen and FDP, Mehr Fortschritt wagen. Bündnis für Freiheit, Gerechtigkeit und Nachhaltigkeit. Koalitionsvertrag 2021 – 2025 zwischen der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands (SPD), BÜNDNIS 90 / DIE GRÜNEN und den Freien Demokraten (FDP) [Dare more progress. Alliance for freedom, justice and sustainability. Coalition agreement 2021 – 2025 between SPD, BÜNDNIS 90 / THE GREENS and FDP], Berlin 2021, available at: [https://www.spd.de/fileadmin/Dokumente/Koalitionsvertrag/Koalitionsvertrag\\_2021-2025.pdf](https://www.spd.de/fileadmin/Dokumente/Koalitionsvertrag/Koalitionsvertrag_2021-2025.pdf)

<sup>55</sup> Moritz Arndt, Kai Buschbom, Claudia Neu, Ljubica Nikolic, Helena Reingen, Maike Simmank, Berthold Vogel and Dagmar Wicklow, Soziale Orte: Ein Konzept zur Stärkung lokalen Zusammenhalts [Social Focal Points: an Approach to Strengthening Local Cohesion], Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bonn 2020.

### RECOMMENDATION 3: LISTEN MORE, ENHANCE RESPECT AND APPRECIATION

A lack of trust in political leaders is nothing new. The discrepancy between high levels of approval for democracy as a form of government and poor assessments of its actual functioning is also a familiar finding. The FES study *Vertrauen in Demokratie* (Trust in Democracy), 2019, posited a close connection between dwindling trust in democratic functioning and growing social inequality.<sup>56</sup> But the fact that a lack of trust is not unusual does not necessarily mean that it is set in stone.

If we look beyond people's substantive demands, concerns and needs at policy level, one desire in particular runs like a red thread through the interviews: people want to be listened to and want politicians to take an interest in them. This concerns above all political procedures. This manifests itself not only in specific demands (such as a call for more direct democracy), but especially in a fundamental desire for a 'dialogical relationship between governors and governed'.<sup>57</sup> Emotional reactions in the interviews, ranging from anger at 'those at the top' to tears of gratitude for a chance to talk, were not exceptional. On one hand, this may be attributed to the very special circumstances of the pandemic, but on the other, many of the reactions that came to light point to a general distance from politics. People thus seem to regard 'closer proximity' as a political duty, at both local and national level:

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"They always come only at  
election time and we never see them again.  
But it's important that they listen to people's  
needs. I know that they can't do everything  
we ask for, but it's also important  
just to listen."

- WOMAN (AGE 39) FROM BITTERFELD

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A variety of formats are possible to enable politicians to satisfy this desire for a dialogical relationship. In recent

years, representatives of different parties have conducted roaming round-tables (such as kitchen-table tours, listening tours, 'Ise auf Achse' or 'Ise on the road'), as well as localised citizen dialogues (such as pub discussions, 'parlour debates'). At the height of the Covid 19 pandemic the dialogue from some of these exchange formats was transposed online. There are also opportunities for personal interaction without an audience, in which politicians, for example, make time slots available in their calendar. Citizens can arrange an appointment online, and later on there may be a home visit, perhaps bringing along cakes ('sitting room conversations'). Dialogue formats, which can range from small-scale listening sessions to consultation tours, enable representatives and represented to get to know one another better and build trust. The politician can obtain a better idea of citizens' feelings, concerns and wishes, while citizens in most cases acquire a better appreciation of how complex it is to reach solutions and how many competing claims have to be considered. As the above quotation clearly shows, it is essential that such opportunities to meet are also (and above all) made available outside election campaigns so that people do not get the impression that politicians are only using them to try to get re-elected.

When it is about more than listening – usually shortly after such meetings citizens ask themselves what the politician is going to do about what they have just heard – it is worth looking at the still innovative and exciting idea of 'future councils', which Patrizia Nanz and Claus Leggewie present in their book *Die Konsultative* (Consultative), 2016.<sup>58</sup> Future councils are committees or panels that exchange ideas and develop solutions about future issues and challenges, in cooperation with existing democratic institutions. In their book the authors invoke consultation as the 'fourth estate', explaining: 'for that purpose broad and far-reaching citizen consultation should precede and follow up legislative and decision-making procedures'. Future councils can be established at all political levels, from the municipal to the European. They bring together valuable experiences and knowledge from citizens, and in this way can help to develop suitable solution strategies cooperatively.<sup>59</sup> It is important when setting up and implementing future councils that the participants constitute a representative reflection of society and are not just the 'usual suspects' (perhaps selected by lottery or outreach participation, and given expense allowances). It is equally important, especially at the local or regional level, that citizens reach agreement on the topics to be discussed, and that democratic institutions (such as the state parliament) are obliged to respond to measures future councils recommend. In the absence of such a

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<sup>56</sup> Frank Decker, Volker Best, Sandra Fischer and Anne Küppers, *Vertrauen in Demokratie: Wie zufrieden sind die Menschen in Deutschland mit Regierung, Staat und Politik?* [Trust in Democracy: How Satisfied are People in Germany with Government, State and Politics?] Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bonn 2019, available at: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/fes/15621-20190822.pdf>

<sup>57</sup> Susanne Pickel, 'Wahlkampfzeit ist Responsivitätszeit'. Die Kluft zwischen Politikern und Bürgern in der repräsentativen Demokratie [Election Time is Responsivity Time. The Gulf Between Politicians and Citizens in Representative Democracy], in: Tom Mannewitz (ed.), *Die Demokratie und ihre Defekte. Analysen und Reformvorschläge* [Democracy and its Defects. Analyses and Reform Proposals], Wiesbaden 2018, pp. 171–195, here: p. 175.

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<sup>58</sup> Patrizia Nanz and Claus Leggewie, *Die Konsultative: Mehr Demokratie durch Bürgerbeteiligung* [Consultative: More Democracy Through Citizen Participation], Bonn 2016.

<sup>59</sup> See also the considerations on a citizen council for federal politics. Brigitte Geißel and Stefan Jung, *Mehr Mitsprache wagen: Ein Beteiligungsrat für die Bundespolitik* [Dare to have more say: A citizen council for federal politics], Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bonn 2019, available at: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/fes/15848.pdf>

response, there is a danger that participation formats degenerate into mere 'particainment', as urban planner Klaus Selle put it.<sup>60</sup>

Ultimately, we recommend that dialogue and participation formats should be established at all levels, characterised by representative participants and transparent outcomes. There should be communication before and after meetings through diverse channels and in plain language. Regional institutions should always have the authority to plan and implement exchange and participation events effectively, so that they do not have to be outsourced to agencies. This will strengthen local people's identification with the region and trust in politics.

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**60** Klaus Selle, Particainment oder: Beteiligen wir uns zu Tode? [Particainment or: Do we participate ourselves to death?], Aachen 2011, available at: [https://publications.rwth-aachen.de/record/140376/files/2011\\_selle\\_particainment.pdf](https://publications.rwth-aachen.de/record/140376/files/2011_selle_particainment.pdf). On experiences in an international context see Philippe Narval, Direkte Beteiligung stärken! Den Menschen Zukunft zutrauen [Strengthen direct participation! Trust people with the future], in: böll.brief - Demokratie & Gesellschaft 17 (2019), pp. 14-24, available at: [https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/2019-11/b%C3%B6ll.brief\\_DeGe-17\\_Debatten\\_zur\\_Demokratie.pdf?dimension1=division\\_ppf](https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/2019-11/b%C3%B6ll.brief_DeGe-17_Debatten_zur_Demokratie.pdf?dimension1=division_ppf), as well as the evaluation of and recommendations for citizen councils by Wolfgang Merkel, Filip Milačić and Andreas Schäfer. Wolfgang Merkel and Filip Milačić and Andreas Schäfer, Bürgerräte: Neue Wege zur Demokratisierung der Demokratie [Citizen Councils: New Ways to Democratise Democracy] Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation, Bonn 2021, available at: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/wien/18444.pdf>



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## INTERVIEWERS

Doorstep conversations were conducted by four interviewers, who were recruited and trained within the framework of the study project. Documentation was carried out manually in the form of interview transcripts on smartphones or tablets.



*"During the time I worked as an interviewer I became aware of how many people have fallen off the radar of politics. They want to get involved, for example, before a new shopping centre is built opposite where they live. I got the impression that all the respondents had a clear idea of what politics means, namely first listening and then doing."*

- **Lena Hoseit**, who conducted the interviews in **Duisburg** and **Bochum**



*"I was particularly touched by people's lack of prospects and struck by how it took away people's interest in politics."*

- **Gloria Leo**, who conducted the interviews in **Saarbrücken** region



*"In Bitterfeld-Wolfen it really brought home to me how much individual socioeconomic circumstances shape people's outlook on the future and the past, especially the (political and economic) transition. It was sobering in my interviews with young people aged 18–22 to hear them talk about their feeling that they personally and their region had been left behind by politics, and that they had few job prospects outside elderly care and the chemical industry."*

- **Sina Musfeldt**, who conducted the interviews in **Bitterfeld-Wolfen** and **Zeitz**



*"I was particularly touched by the sometimes very personal life stories and experiences I was given some small insight into during the interviews. Sometimes I felt that people's real needs were 'speaking' through these stories."*

- **Karsten Valerius**, who conducted the interviews in **Western Pomerania-Greifswald**



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# Abbreviations

<b>AfD</b>	Alternative für Deutschland
<b>ARD</b>	Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland [Association of Public Service Broadcasting Corporations of the Federal Republic of Germany]
<b>CDU</b>	Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands [Christian Democratic Union]
<b>DDR</b>	Deutsche Demokratische Republik [German Democratic Republic; GDR]
<b>DeZIM</b>	Deutsches Zentrum für Integrations- und Migrationsforschung [German Centre for Integration and Migration Research]
<b>FDP</b>	Freie Demokratische Partei [Free Democratic Party ]
<b>FES</b>	Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
<b>GAL</b>	Grün-Alternativ-Liberal' [Green-Alternative-Liberal]
<b>GDP</b>	Gross domestic product
<b>GIZ</b>	Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit [Agency for International Cooperation]
<b>ISI</b>	Fraunhofer-Institut für System- und Innovationsforschung [Institute for Systems and Innovation Research]
<b>KfW</b>	Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau [German national development bank]
<b>SGB</b>	Sozialgesetzbuch [Social Security Code]
<b>SPD</b>	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands [Social Democratic Party]
<b>TAN</b>	Traditionalistisch-Autoritär-Nationalistisch [Traditionalist-authoritarian-nationalist]
<b>WBGU</b>	Wissenschaftlicher Beirat der Bundesregierung Globale Umweltveränderungen [German Advisory Council on Global Change]
<b>ZDF</b>	Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen [TV channel]







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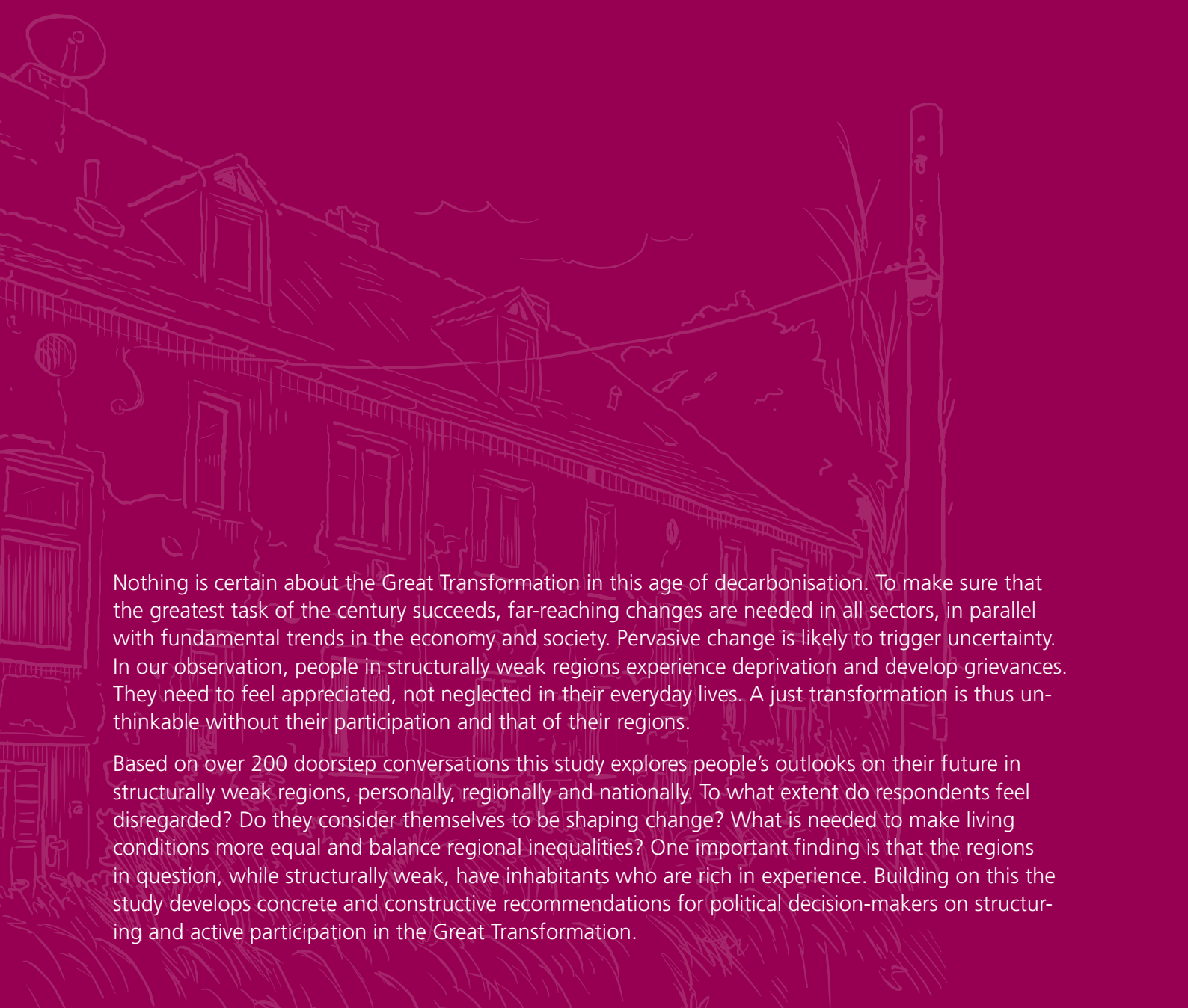
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Nothing is certain about the Great Transformation in this age of decarbonisation. To make sure that the greatest task of the century succeeds, far-reaching changes are needed in all sectors, in parallel with fundamental trends in the economy and society. Pervasive change is likely to trigger uncertainty. In our observation, people in structurally weak regions experience deprivation and develop grievances. They need to feel appreciated, not neglected in their everyday lives. A just transformation is thus unthinkable without their participation and that of their regions.

Based on over 200 doorstep conversations this study explores people's outlooks on their future in structurally weak regions, personally, regionally and nationally. To what extent do respondents feel disregarded? Do they consider themselves to be shaping change? What is needed to make living conditions more equal and balance regional inequalities? One important finding is that the regions in question, while structurally weak, have inhabitants who are rich in experience. Building on this the study develops concrete and constructive recommendations for political decision-makers on structuring and active participation in the Great Transformation.



This publication follows on from a study published in 2018:

Johannes Hillje:  
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